‘Power flows from the Blessing of the Virgin’

The Performance of Kumari Worship as a site of Manufacturing Consent in Nepal

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DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation *'Power flows from the Blessing of the Virgin': The Performance of Kumari Worship as a site of Manufacturing Consent in Nepal*, submitted by **Prerna Pradhan** at the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** in **Theatre and Performance Studies**, is an original work and has not been submitted so far, in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of this or any other University or Institution.

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation titled, ***'Power flows from the Blessing of the Virgin': The Performance of Kumari Worship as a site of Manufacturing Consent in Nepal***, submitted by **PRERNA PRADHAN** is in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy of this University. This dissertation has not been submitted for the award of any other degree in this University or any other University and is her original work.

We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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Acknowledgement

It was the winter of 2012 in Kathmandu, when a chance encounter with Kumari in a souvenir shop changed my course of research. I came across a painting of Kumari placed along with other paintings which caught my attention. It was an ordinary painting and yet it was not. I had a strong urge to visit Durbar Square where the Kumari *Chen* was situated and possibly catch a glimpse of Kumari. I had no idea who the presiding Kumari was at that time. I did visit the Square late in the evening and managed to look at the *Chen* from outside, but could not see Kumari. I did not give a serious thought of pursuing a research on Kumari till 2014, but the painting still flickered a sense of interest every now and then. It was in 2014 when I finally got this brilliant opportunity to begin my research on Kumari. And that is when I saw Matina Shakya (the Kathmandu Kumari) during *Indra Jatra* at the Durbar Square.

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…To Aama, Aapa and all the Kumaris, in whose frail shoulders, lies the responsibility of keeping the hopes, expectations and traditions alive…

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INTRODUCTION

The year was 1768 and Indra Jatra was about to culminate, but not before Kumari made her appearance. Her third eye glistened with the redness of her outfit. She waited outside her palace for the king Jaya Prakasha Malla to give him tika (vermillian) as a sign of approval to rule for one more year. But who came instead of Malla was an invader from the Gorkha district Prithvinarayan Shah. All eyes were on Kumari and in the fraction of second she wrote down two dynasties' fate. She lifted up her left hand and put the tika and legitimated Shah Rule in Nepal. (Tree, 2014:10-11)

This narrative demonstrates the powerful presence of Kumari in the socio-political landscape of Nepal. Kumari (Fig. 1) or *Dyah Meiju* (in Newari), also known as the living or virgin goddess is being worshipped in Nepal as the most powerful goddess. In this study, I have included the present three Kumaris and some former Kumaris of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur[1]. Kumari is a pre-pubescent girl, of which the Kathmandu and Bhaktapur Kumaris belong to the Buddhist Shakya[2] caste and the Patan Kumari is selected from the Vajracharya caste of the Newar community of Nepal. The Shakya and the Vajracharya caste do not practice celibacy[3] but the young boys of both the castes go through an initiation ceremony called *bare chuegu* in order to become monks for four days and thus become a member of a *baha*[4]. The Kumaris are selected from one of the *baha*s and there should not be any inter-caste marriage in the family. She is considered as an incarnation of Taleju (Fig. 2), the tutelary Hindu deity of the Malla (1201-1768) and the Shah dynasty (1768-2008). From the Malla dynasty to the present rule, the public performance of Kumari worship continues unabated. The power of Kumari ritual can be understood with this fact that the Maoist,

[1] Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur are three adjoining towns falling under Kirtipur, Lalitpur and Bhaktapur districts. They were Malla kingdoms till 18th century.

[2] The Shakyas claim to be the descendant of Shakyamuni Buddha's family of Kapilavastu. In the Newar community, the caste is associated with goldsmith occupation who also perform the role of tantric Buddhist priestly affairs along with the Vajracharya caste. In the Hindu caste hierarchy, the goldsmith caste is considered as a polluting caste because of the occupation of separating gold from other metal. But in the context of Newar community, it is not seen in that light and is given much respect as opposed to its Hindu counterpart of goldsmith.

[3] The celibate monks did exist in the Kathmandu Valley however their number dwindled as against the married Vajrayana priests during the middle of the Malla period towards the 12th century (Gellner, 2001:109; Allen, 2000:166).

[4] *Baha* is the Newar Buddhist Monastery for the Sanskrit term *Vihar*.

who dared to challenge and overthrow the monarchy, could not dare to challenge the royal institution of Kumari. She is selected based on the physical perfection of thirty two *lakshans* (characteristics) and an auspicious horoscope. She remains Kumari until she attains the age of puberty or bleeds due to any other reason. Throughout her reign as Kumari, her foot does not touch the ground outside the Kumari *Chen* (Kumari palace) (Fig. 3) and she can make only thirteen public appearances in a year (Shakya, 2012:34). The presence of Kumari transcends the religious space and appears to have figured strongly in the socio-political dynamics of the State. She is worshipped, carried out in palanquin and chariots, revered and feared by all. She is believed to be the supreme commander— an embodiment of beauty, wrath and kindness. Even the King and the President has to bow in front of her, beg her approval to rule and her decisions cannot be questioned nor can they be ridiculed.

This dissertation aims to study the Kumari cult after it was taken out from its own ritual location and community and turned into a public enactment from 18th century onwards. As part of politics of cultural appropriation and manufacturing of popular consent by the State the public worship of Kumari was introduced to exhibit the royal patronage over the local deity. I will try to explore this question through the following key categories: i) the politics of patronage that tries to appropriate this cult in the power domain through institutionalization and idealization of religious tolerance, ii) insertion of various spectacular events that exhibited the power politics of the State and iii) gendering of Kumari that goes against stereotypical gender identity and opens up new challenges for gender performativity. Using the methodology of ritual, politics of performance and gender performative studies, this research will explore the performative side of the public worship. This research will include various festivals like *Kumari Jatra, Indra Jatra, Rato Machhindranath Jatra* and so on, not only to highlight Kumari's obligatory presence, but also to examine the role played by the State to ensure Kumari's presence in the cultural and political landscape of Nepal.

On 25 April, 2015, Nepal experienced a massive earthquake, resulting in great devastation across the country. While most of the centuries old buildings like the 16th century Kasthamandap temple (from which Kathmandu supposedly derives its name) crumbled down to dust, the monument that stood firmly in bustling Basantapur Square was the Kumari *Chen*. Saturday being a weekly holiday in Nepal, many devotees had gathered to worship her inside the palace. It was one of the biggest calamity the valley had encountered ever since the 1934 earthquake. I was

wondering if Kumari would feature in the news as has been the case in previous natural disasters, the royal massacre of 2001, even in the ten years long civil war (1996-2006) and many other important events. I was very much right when I came across a news report in an Indian newspaper, *The Times of India*, where it was mentioned how in a sudden turn of events those devotees who had gathered upstairs along with a few curious tourists inside the palace premises were miraculously saved (Pradhan, TOI, 2015). Gautam Shakya, an 11th generation caretaker says:

> Kumari ghar withstood the devastating earthquake because of Kumari's powers. Suddenly Kumari ghar started swaying. A guide asked the tourists to think of Kumari and hold on to the wooden pillars tight. After the tremors, the temples and palaces all around were in ruins. Eighty people lay dead outside. Nothing happened to Kumari ghar, or the devotees or the tourists inside (Pradhan, TOI, 2015).

According to her caretakers who keep a close watch on her, the Kathmandu Kumari has always displayed signs of imminent danger that might befall. This can be another piece of news for some, but for thousands of devotees who make every effort count to catch a glimpse of Kumari, is one single hope to rely upon in times of need and uncertainty. It will remain as one important narrative amongst so many which has been passed on to glorify the Kumari cult in Nepal.

Located in the Himalayas, Nepal, a land-locked country in South Asia, is a melting pot of many communities with various cultures, ethnicities and religions. Among them, Newar is considered as one of the oldest communities. At present, they inhabit in the cities of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur. The community is divided into different castes according to the observance of purity of which the Vajracharya and Shakya belong to the priestly caste. The Newars are basically Vajrayana Buddhist, but due to patron influences they have assimilated some Hindu religio-cultural practices as well. Kumari worship, which was basically a Buddhist ritual, is one of the examples of this religious assimilation and cultural appropriation.

Despite of its powerful presence on the political and cultural backdrop of Nepal, there are very few scholarly works around the Kumari worship. Most of the existing works are anthropological in nature and do not deal with many crucial, affective and critical aspects of the worship. Michael Allen's work (1989) is considered to be one of the earliest one, which discusses

about the Newar life and the Kumari cult that serves as a point of reference to the later scholars. John Mellowship (2007) has tried to understand Kumari worship as a series of dramatic enactments where he refers to Kumari worship as a form of theatre. He does not go deep into the analytical study of theatre, but he does foregrounds the basic understanding of theatre through Kumari worship and the myriad ritualistic practices that go around it. Isabella Tree (2014) has analyzed the mythical stories of Taleju and the making of Kumari. Rashmila Shakya (2012) has discussed about her own experiences of being worshipped as a goddess and then settling back to a normal mortal's life.[5] No doubt these works are important and they will definitely help me to base my study. My study is a departure in a sense that it aims to capture the political undercurrents behind the performance of ritual which takes place in order to create the face of power: Kumari. Unlike other studies, this study takes politics of ritualistic performative practices in its centre, in the context of which the anthropological accounts still seem under-explored.

The term in the title of this dissertation 'manufacturing consent' is borrowed from Noam Chomsky (1988), who discusses about how media becomes a strong tool to influence the thought process of the public. I am using the term in the different context of Kumari cult where performance of ritual and worship becomes a tool in manufacturing of the public consent. This research has tried to weave through strands of patron power, manufacturing ritual for performance and the world of Kumari and her presentation of self in everyday life. This matrix of relationship opens up some crucial questions to create a foundation and framework.

It is difficult to specify the exact time frame when the Kumari cult came into existence, but it is clear that the cult has gone through transformtions. One reason was the exclusive practice of the cult by the Vajracharya and Shakya Newars as a form of community ritual. The cult was practiced within the community at the *Baha* or at the Royal palaces of the three cities whenever required. Initially, the cult was a private affair of the community and the King. It became a public event during the eighteenth century when Kathmandu valley ruler Jaya Prakasha Malla brought in the then Kumari out of her community. He established the *Kumari Chen* for her inside the Royal Palace compound, giving access to the Hindu monarchs whenever they wanted (Tree, 2014:165).

[5] Rashmila Shakya was a former Royal kumari in the period of 1984-1991. She has written a book titled *From Goddess to Mortal: The True Life Story of a Former Royal Kumari as told to Scott Berry.*

This has also to do with the politics of privatization of ritual, and how, this in turn, transforms the meaning of the ritual.

Popular accounts and news reports on the Kumari cult try to focus on Kumari's secluded life, frightening initiations in the dead of night and cursed married life. Such accounts are full of orientalist and ethnocentric depictions. I have tried to do away with this method of looking at the cult. Instead, I question and critically examine the relationship between the political showcase of power through the cult and the ritual worship in the public space. It appears that the politics is not only performed in public space but it also becomes part of the private world of the child whom we know as Kumari. This drives us to think if the private world of Kumari can be looked upon as the world of 'hidden transcript' that Scott talks about (Scott 1990)? How Kumari performs in private world solidifies or weakens the foundations of this relationship between patronage, ritual and the spectacle?

Thinking through various festivals like *Kumari Jatra, Indra Jatra, Rato Machhindranath Jatra, Seto Machhindranath Jatra* and so on, this research has looked at the political importance and spectacle aroused by Kumari's public appearances and performances. These appearences and performances were accommodated to serve identinarian and political purpose of all the partakers, be it the the royal patrons, the Newar community, the Brahminical heads or the State. Such performances often slowly and smoothly blend with the religious rituals as an unbreakable and indisputable content. Their connection and disjunction itself becomes an interesting site of cultural performance. This asks us to think if it is a masquerading performance of acquiring power without the usage of violence or physical force as a means.

This research examines if the Kumari's lived-experience (from mundane to specific) can be seen as a case of spiral movement as against the general idea of it being considered as a cyclical transformation that simplifies the actual complex web; it appears that the transition from one identity to the next does not bring her back to the same state that she started with. She might retain a little of both: pre and post Kumari life. What would be the appropriate term for this kind of transformation? This research delineates to decipher the codes within which various performative elements are waiting to be discovered and displayed.

I have used the methodology of ritual, performance and gender performative studies to carry out this research. In this regard, Catherine Bell's analysis of how the rituals play the role to 'construct, display and promote' the power-hungry institutions can be of immense importance (Bell, 1997:128). Goffman's idea of presentation of self in everyday lives further helps in analyzing the political strategies and intentionality behind the enactment of ritual and spectacle. It is only through a tried and tested code of conduct that one's presence creates one's meaning and identity in the broader arena of interactivity. The theory of gender performativity by Judith Butler provides an interesting conceptual framework to complicate the role of gender as Kumari and female impersonation and representation of Kumari exists side by side. The framework structures my argument from outside rather than from inside: from a larger frame of the cult to Kumari- a gradual centripetal movement. Drawing from Bell's perspective on ritual, this dissertation examines the strategies by which rituals establish and naturalize cultural and political hierarchies through the constructed relationship of authority and submission. What we see is that while power patronized the ritual, the ritual in return empowered the patron. Bell's theory can be a point of departure to study the complexities of the relationship and see if it works in the context of the Kumari cult in Nepal.

Using Butler's concept of abject bodies, I will attempt to see Kumari's virtuous body and what it takes to be called so. Butler gives stress on how meanings are not constructed by inside but outside of what is not, through reiteration and referentiality (Butler, 1993:2). There is this threshold which need to be ascertained first as periphery and the exclusiveness of one territory defines the other. According to Butler, it is the citation of heterosexual and phallocentric norms which gives a specific gender to a body. However, in case of Kumari, there are times when the perception of a genderless body surfaces itself evidently, which I will mention in Chapter III and observe if Butler's theory can make justice or not.

My methodology has also incorporated Erving Goffman's concept of social role as an enactment of rights and duties to a given status and observe the relationship of performance and reception that manifests as a result to explore the power dynamics. This further exemplifies if there

is any 'defensive and protective practices' (on stage/off stage) performed in a codified manner between Kumari and the spectators.[6]

My methods draws on my field work in the three cities of Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Patan, interviews with the Kumaris' families, former Kumaris, Nepalese scholars who can be of immense help. Documentation of the festivals like *Indra Jatra*, *Rato Machhindranath Jatra*, *Seto Machhindranath Jatra* and so on where Kumari makes a public appearances and also archives like CNAS (Centre for Nepalese and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University), Royal Nepal Academy and so on.

The first chapter provides a brief historiography of the Kumari worship and in doing so, it also demonstrated how the mobilization of space from the community to the royal sphere influenced the patrons and empowered them. The mobilization created an autonomy to a large extent to filter rituals and patronize them according to the convenience of the patrons, thereby turning the Kumari worship as a legitimate way to seek Kumari's approval to rule. As the space transferred power, it also made the transformation of Taleju into Kumari smooth and acceptable. As the Kumari worship travelled out of the community, it became a crucial part of royal devotion through not only patronization of the tradition, but also through the manufacturing of rituals that would legitimate accessibility to Hindu kings into the local sacred space. In the garb of religious tolerance between Hindus and Buddhists, an exaggerated form of idealization took place, the outcome of a political act to maintain equilibrium and keep both the sides contended.

It also looks into the transformation of Kumari to Taleju as a strategy to incorporate a fierce mainstream Hindu goddess identity into a Buddhist deity through the process of domestication and thus questions the very idea of religious tolerance. The rituals get patronized, resulting in the empowerment of the patron, hence the creation of consent. Not only were the rituals patronized, they were brahmanized in order to include more and more Brahmin priests within the hegemonic structure and exclude the Newar priests or limit their role to a large extent giving rise to ambiguousness in the ritualistic practices. This sense of ambiguity turned out to be advantageous in the transmigration of power as Kumari left the threshold of her community and took refuge in the royal compound as a symbolic gesture of empowering the king in the past, now the government

[6] Erving Goffman uses this term to explain a strategy to defend one's projection of image and, on the other hand, the other person protects that image by responding in a certain constructed pattern (Goffman, 1956:7).

heads. This chapter also brings into discussion the attention that the royal institution of Kumari worship continues to receive even after the monarchy was replaced by the sovereign state. The President and the Prime Minister perform the role of the king; the actors did change, but the role has been carried on.

The second chapter primarily analyses three religious street festivals *Rato Machhindranath Jatra, Seto Machhindranath Jatra* and *Indra Jatra*/*Kumari Jatra* where Kumari makes her public appearances. It throws open discussion on how the empowerment of the patron is not enough; there should be a regular exhibition of the Kumari's approval as a token of realization to the spectators of the roles performed by the powerful potent. By analyzing these three festivals, the chapter discusses the various performances that were inserted and appropriated in order to create a sacred space, then dominate that space through spectacle and generate political visibility in the garb of religious function. It is only through achieving these three points that the exhibition of power can be achieved amongst the audience. This chapter interrogates the co-presence of Kumari, the politically empowered section and the religious contestation in the festival space, opening many possibilities of their inter-dependence as a survival tactic. This chapter also tries to investigate the various ways in which these Newar street festivals have been hijacked first, turned into Hinduised models and introduced Kumari's appearance into them through her public worship. Not only that, this study also attempts to question if this hijacks been successful, or do we still see traces of resistance in order to prevent an erased past for the Newar community.

The third chapter discusses the facets of Kumari and her embodiment. I argue that the idea of fluidity is central to Kumari. The powerful, fierce and benevolent identity of Kumari is manufactured in various layers and it is the core argument of the chapter that the gender identity of Kumari cannot be equated with a straightforward idea of two constructed genders. It provides an alternate aspect to view Kumari within the folds of gender and outside it. It is the split nature of Kumari's identity that gives rise to multiple identities that performs myriad roles as the timeline of Kumari sees a rupture during the pre, post and the in-between. The social identity of Kumari finds a counterpart in the performance of *Devi Pyakham* as young boys perform the role of Kumari in a dance form and introduces the readers to another layer of gender performativity. Not only that, even the well-constructed gender formation gets problematized as the discussion enters the territory of gendered identities like that of puberty, motherhood and also an ambiguous arena of

Bodhisattva which does not conform to a male-female dichotomy. This chapter broadly discusses the gendering of Kumari not only through her social identity, but will also form another perspective of performing gender through the performative identity of Kumari seen in the *Devi Pyakham* dance. The idea of gendering performativity has been applied in this chapter through various perspectives and gives the reader an opportunity to get engaged in a new direction and to understand the fluidity of gender and gendering in the case of an absolute identity that is Kumari.

What made the performance of Kumari cult such an indispensable part of Nepalese society? How did the enactment of rituals in public spaces give rise to the perceptual feelings in which the people viewed Kumari? What were the additions of public enactments (ritual and otherwise) in the cult towards later part of the 18th century when power transferred from the Malla to the Shah dynasty to make it spectacular? Is the Kumari a symbol of religious tolerance as is believed or is there an unseen performance of power and contestations? What does performance of perfection entail in the engendering of Kumari? Is it correct to club Kumari's identities-pre and post Kumari under one category? In trying to read her social identities are we missing out on the other side of performative identities? How does performing puberty and act of mothering constricts the structures of gendered role and performance? Is *Devi Pyakham* just another form of female impersonation or does it subvert the very idea of it? How does Kumari's identification in terms of gendered identities oscillate in between gendered hierarchy, non-genderedness and the possibility of an alterior being? These are some vital questions that can arise in the course of the following chapters that will help seek possible answers if not the ultimate one.

Chapter I

Patronizing Ritual: Powering Kumari

1.1 Introduction

In the dead of night, once a Malla king, along with a beautiful woman, was playing dice in his room. That woman was no ordinary woman, but the tutelary goddess of the dynasty. She used to advise the king on every matter for the betterment of his kingdom. But on that fateful night, the king could not resist her beauty and made sexual advances due to which she got enraged and left the room. The king tried everything to bring the goddess back, but failed to do so. One night she did come, but in his dreams, and told him that she would reside in a virgin girl from the Shakya caste of the Newar community and she should be worshipped as her incarnation, although she also said that she would never forget the insult and his lineage will fade out after a few generations. (Tree, 2014:154-158) (Fig. 4)

This is one of the several narratives that establishes the Kumari cult and its relationship with the patron. These narratives have played an important role to legitimate the contributions of patronage in the success of continuation of Kumari worship. This chapter focuses on the evolution of Kumari worship, and the politics of appropriation and subversion through patronization of ritual of Kumari worship. Looking into the patronizing of ritual, the chapter interrogates the idealized notion of religious tolerance and highlights the various aspects of performativity invested in the transformation of Taleju to Kumari to empower the patron. John Mellowship has strongly asserted that the public worship of Kumari had a direct connection to the entrancement of the people and empowerment of the king (Mellowship, 2007:99). Isabella Tree, on the other hand, saw the idealized notion of religious tolerance and the king's public veneration to Kumari as a shield to protect and empower the king (Tree, 2014:301). This chapter will attempt to discuss why and how the Kumari worship no longer remained within the community ritualistic practices as the cult gradually became an indispensable part of public domain. It will showcase the process and power

of patronization changing the definition of ritual as it underwent through the political rites of passage.

In the quest of Kumari or *Dyah Meiju*, the narratives mingled with historical events keeps coming back again and again. The history of Kumari worship is not a linear passage that can be traced without much difficulty. It clearly consists of various voices, intersecting and contrasting each other at many crossroads. One of the many narratives being given in the beginning that have come across narrates the Malla time (1200-1767), about how and why the eighteen-armed tutelary goddess Taleju (another form of Durga) directed the king in his dream to worship Kumari that culminated in the tradition of worshipping Kumari in the royal cities of Kantipur (Kathmandu), Lalitpur (Patan), Bhadgaon (Bhaktapur) and many other neighboring villages. The narratives however do not mention which Malla king and this gives freedom to all the Malla kings to claim themselves as the progenitors of the cult. It is interesting to see that dream played a significant role in the Kumari- related narratives, that increased during the Malla rule, each narrative claiming the founder to be one of the Malla rulers be it Trailokya Malla (Bhaktapur), Siddhinarasimha Malla (Patan), Pratapa Malla (Kathmandu), Jaya Prakasha Malla (Kathmandu) and so on. The reason for various narratives can also be attributed to the contestation amongst the Malla rulers of the Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Patan. Although they belonged to the same family tree, they did not share an amiable relationship. Dream symbolism solidifies the relationship between the deity and the dreamer. Everything gets justified on the basis of the dream. The patron takes it as a sign of approval from the deity to take any actions, which goes under the full supervision of the deity concerned. Mahesh Sharma (2001) writes that the dream facilitates the-

> sense of belonging to the local cultural tradition and the sacred power is appropriated, a reason for self-confidence and inspiration, which motivates actions and decisions one is ordinarily not capable of (p. 41).[7]

Dream becomes one of the first steps to the elevation of the status of the patron in the power structure, whose actions thereafter is taken valid in the proselytization of Kumari, and hence is not liable to be resented. Thus, dream symbolism becomes the most common one-sided reason presented to put all the other arguments to rest; giving powers in the hands of few who are

[7] Sharma talks about how a Chamba king Sri Singh built the temple of Parowali in the Chamba district of Himachal Pradesh of India in the year 1844, following the advice of the deity in a dream (Sharma, 2001:41).

privileged to dream. The dream symbolism could be one of the various strategies that were employed to facilitate the presence of Taleju in the Newar community through Kumari, followed by the re-presentation enacted in a new way, through the patronization of rituals.

The intriguing quality of ritual is its flexibility and complex seeing that leads to various interpretations by various minds. There cannot be a linear aspect going in one direction, but a many layered outburst of meanings through speech, acts and practices. It can also be seen as a political tool, which, according to Catherine Bell plays a big role in order to 'construct, display and promote' the supremacy of political institutions (Bell, 1997:128). The Kumari cult is also a result of these three functions that has constructed the foundation of the cult with such a strong base, authorized by the king, that it seems like a duty and rightful act to be a part of it. The mediums and mode might have changed with the passage of time from the royalty to government heads, but the goal of gaining consent to patronize still remains the same and it is religion that performs the role of catalyst in the true sense of the term. In order to understand Kumari worship, we have to understand Nepal and the unending knot between religion, society and the politics, with a bigger influence of patron power and the consent that patronage demands.

1.2 King and After Kings: Roles Changing Hands

Michael Allen, is of view that the cult of worshipping a virgin girl may have started with the arrival of Vajrayana Buddhism in around eleventh century. This existing worship was probably influenced by the visit of the famous tantric Atisha Dipankara Srijnana who was also credited with the foundation of Vajrayana Buddhism in Nepal from Northern India (Allen, 1989:13; Allen, 2000:192). Allen observes that the colophon inscriptions suggest there were references made to Kumari during the reign of Ananta Malla in the late thirteenth century (Allen, 2000:3). However, we cannot deny the fact that this cult might have prevailed even before that may be since sixth century only if we had substantial evidence to support it. According to Allen, there are around eleven Kumaris in Nepal out of which the three Kumaris of Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Patan are considered important since they belonged to the three kingdoms during Malla rule (Allen, 2000:191-92, Mellowship, 2007:33). It was post the Shah invasion (1768) that the Kathmandu

Kumari's status raised high as compared to the other two Kumaris, when Prithvinarayan Shah decided to make Kathmandu his capital. She came to be known as the 'Royal Kumari' as the other two Kumaris fell into obscurity. Allen argues that the 'imported lineage' Hindu deity was associated with the Buddhist Shakya caste in order to gain legitimacy not only of the cultural sphere but also in the domain of political hierarchy (2000:193).

The Newar community is divided between Hinduism and Buddhism, the two major migrating religions of Nepal that had migrated from India to its boundaries at certain time period making it their home. When I refer to Hindus, I mean both the Newari Hindu and the Nepalese Hindu. Hinduism spread as a result of 'refugee dynasties' from as early as the Licchavi Period (400-750 AD) who migrated from India, uprooting the ancient nature-worshipping Kirat rulers (Mellowship, 2007:22). The Licchavi rulers supported Buddhism in the Valley although they were proud to 'be Kshatriyas, patrons of brahmans, and upholders of the caste system' (Gellner, 1995:7). The Thakuri period succeeded the Licchavis and then it was the turn of the Malla period when the Hindu influence reached its zenith. One of the most important figures of the Malla era was considered to be Jayasthiti Malla (1382-95) of Bhaktapur. He was not a direct descendent of the previous King. He married the eight years old granddaughter of Rudra Malla named Rajjaladevi (daughter of Jagatsimha and Rudra Malla's daughter Nayakadevi) and ascended the throne.[8]Jayasthihti Malla first introduced the caste system among the Newars dividing them into thirty two castes according to the four *varnas*. The Newars accepted the division as they had accepted the Mallas as 'Newar kings'. On the contrary, the Mallas always called themselves *suryavamsi*, the descendants of Rama and the Solar dynasty and hence not local. They translated the Hindu law texts of Manu into Newari and took great interest in producing Hindu themed plays in Maithili and Newari (Gellner, 1995:9). It should be noted here that Newar Buddhism could be traced back to the Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism that was already flourished in north India. As it travelled to Kathmandu Valley, it slowly took a form different from other branches of Buddhism like Tibetan and Theravada, replacing celibacy with strong tantric practices. Apart from this, the influence of Hinduism was immense even amongst the Newars and so the community's religious preference split into two: Newari Hindus who followed Siva (the *Sivamargi*) having a Brahmin priest and Newari Buddhist following Buddha (the *Budhhmargi*) with a Vajrayana priest

[8] Jagatsimha did not have a son and hence according to the Dolaji tradition Jayasthithi Malla became the King after the marriage (Vajracarya, 2009:125-126).

(Gellner, 2001:16). During the Malla rule, Buddhism and Hinduism started to share a same platform, tantrism for instance, and that is when the cultural and religious assimilation started to take place giving rise to shared temples, cults and deities. As the Hindu influence grew extensively with the arrival of Hindu kings, the importance of their deities also took a front seat. The local deities were very much restricted to local regions and did not have a strong influence in the valley as a whole. It went in the favor of the Hindu kings to make sacred geographies out of their territories. Each kingdom had a tutelary deity to protect it from outside forces. The protection could not have been successful if the faith of the local people was not taken under consideration. That's when the requirement of a local yet universalized deity came into surface giving rise to the concept of incarnation which was nothing but an idealized accommodating strategical step to bring power within the territories of the kings in the name of tutelary deity. This step gave the control in the king's hands making him the patron and hence the next powerful to the goddess. As a result, the tutelary goddess became the titular goddess within the power structures. It resulted in the worship of three different Kumaris for three different kingdoms, each enjoying loyalty from three different patrons. The territorialisation is so strict that till today the respective Kumaris are not allowed to meet each other during their tenure and maintain that norm till the end of their term fearing that the equally powerful co-presence of Kumaris might harm the mortal beings. Of course, this has more to do with the territorial negotiations of patrons than those of Kumaris. The patrons received the support of the people through the idealization of religious tolerance symbolized in Kumari, and this ritual of gaining support has never failed in any way, not even in the contemporary post monarchial scenario.

After the abolition of monarchy in 2008, it becomes crucial to observe who performs the role of the king in the performance of Kumari worship. Will there be any room for the king or would it be erased altogether giving rise to newer traditions? When Gyanendra became the king of Nepal, post the gruesome and mysterious royal massacre of king Birendra Bir Bikram Shah and his entire family, he made every effort to please the people by emerging out of Kumari *Chen* with a *tika*[9]on his forehead, a sign of the newly appointed Kumari's approval.[10] In the *Indra Jatra* of

[9] Rice and curd mixed with vermillion powder.

[10] Generally the kumari is replaced after the death of a king, but there was a sudden haste to do that. The massacre had taken place in the month of June and the installation took place three months ahead of *Dasain*, which is usually believed to be the most auspicious time (Tree, 2014:101, 107).

2007, the then Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala had entered the Kumari *Chen*, declaring that doing so he was breaking the tradition of the kings bringing victory to the people (Tree, 2014: 336). Also the Maoist party did declare that it would wipe out all the institutions associated with the royalty. However, when Maoist government came to power in 2008, a flag was hoisted at the Kumari *Chen* for some time which read 'The Communist Party salutes Kumari' (Letizia, 2013:36),and the first thing the president Ram BaranYadav did was go to Kumari *Chen* and receive Kumari's blessing as a sign of her approval (Shimkhada, 2008). Would it be right to call it an act of stepping into the king's shoes? As the actors take on new garbs, it becomes crucial to look if they are going to perform a politically-driven role and leave the tantric initiation done by the king to the good care of the priest. Where is the power being channelized to now and who actually exercises it? The recent earthquake has already destroyed many of the ancient buildings that were the reservoir of traditions, narratives and myths; giving rooms to modern structures to crop up easily. A big doubt lurks in the corner whether the Kumari cult is on the edge of its destruction in the midst of this tradition/ modernity and religion/ secularism tussle; a doubt if we are witnessing the beginning of an end.

1.3 Of *Tantras* and the *Mandalas*: Ritual Prototype of Kumari Worship

Hinduism and Buddhism in Nepal are highly influenced by the tantrism and this belief system is based on the concept of *mandala* and *tantra*'s emphasis on *panchtattva* (earth, water, air, fire and akash) along with *kala* (time) Mellowship, 2007:154-156). *Mandala* is a diagram consisting of circles which deciphers the code of earth's origin and hence creates the sacred space of existence in the universe. The center of the *mandala* emanates *Shakti* (power) and as the circle expands outward, the power starts to diminish. And there comes a time when it reaches the maximum limit of expansion resulting in a *pralaya* (explosion) and this process is repeated over and again in ages to come i.e. *kala* (time). It is the journey towards the center which becomes a common theme for Hinduism as well as Buddhism (Mellowship, 2007:39-41). It is the inner portion which is kept concealed from the eyes of the world just as Kumari and the rituals associated with her. In Nepal, the king being considered the center of the *mandala* has to maintain equilibrium for the wellbeing

of his kingdom. For that, he has to keep his tutelary deity Taleju happy and that could be achieved only through the worship of Kumari. He goes through the 8th tantric initiation called the *purna abhisekha* (full anointment), which is considered the highest level in order to make himself capable for the worship. The trinity of the king, Kumari and Taleju is omnipresent in this cult, where Kumari becomes the link between the king and Taleju. In tantric terms the king is *tamas* (the descending quality or inertia), Kumari is *rajas* (the kinetic quality) and Taleju is *sattva* (the ascending quality) (Tree, 2014:175). An interesting point to note here is that both Hinduism and Buddhism practice *tantra*; however, they differ significantly in some aspects. For instance, the left-handed Hindu tantrism brings *yoga* and *kama* together in order to achieve the goal of liberation: asceticism and eroticism (Allen, 1990:13). The practice of *pancamakara*[11], which are otherwise thought to be antisocial, is highly valued in Hindu tantrism. In case of Newar Buddhism, there is a provision of consuming *samhaye baji and khensagan*[12], but practices like sexual intercourse are 'ritualized' and 'internalized as visual meditations' (Tree, 2014:110-111).[13]

To access the powerful Kumari, it is required to practice three important things: *mantra* (chant), *mudra* (gesture) and *tamasi* (Mellowship, 2007:68). It is the flowing nature of female energy and the constant male energy that heightens the efficacy of tantric ritual: the combination of opposite. In the case of Hinduism and Buddhism, the relationship is established through a male-female dichotomy. The inner world of *mandala* attributed to the goddess, hence female is Buddhist, while the outer part is male and hence Hindu (Mellowship, 2007:84). The importance of tantrism in this context is immense because the Kumari cult survives because of its strong affinity with the king, who in turn, drowned himself in the spring of *tantra* to retain that relationship. It is an amazing confluence of two different ways of accommodating *tantra* into the daily rituals without disrupting the belief system and social conventions of the communities. For instance, Hindu tantrism supports animal sacrifice and it is a well-known fact that Nepal itself becomes a sacrificial ground, bathed in blood during the festival of *Dasain*, when each and every Hindu household makes animal sacrifices according to their economic capacity and the

[11] *Pancamakara* is the consumption of wine, meat, fish, parched grain, and sexual intercourse with menstruating wife/woman, temple dancer, prostitute, women of low-caste and so on.

[12] *Samhaye baji and khensagan* is also called *tamasi.* These are polluted foods like alcohol, meat and so on.

[13] It might also be one of the reasons why tantrism is Nepal has still survived, while in India it has lost its ground as against its popularity in the early and late middle ages.

government itself exhibits a mass sacrifice of 108 buffaloes. Hence, Kumari's initiation cannot be possible without animal sacrifice at the Taleju temple. Each and every occasion is purified with the fresh blood of a goat or a buffalo. However, interestingly Newar Buddhism does not promote animal sacrifice. Hence, in the time of Kumari worship, the Buddhist priest offers egg (symbolizing a form of animal sacrifice) to Kumari who takes three bites for body, mind and the spirit of the sacrificed animal (Mellowship, 2007:81). Therefore the rituals, under the royal patronage bear witness to the various contestations and appropriation that must have occurred before it took a certain shape in the present time.

1.4 Patrons, People and the Religious State: An Immersive bond

How do Hindus, or for that matter, Buddhists view this well acclaimed syncretic Hindu-Buddhist relationship? The concept of religion in the western world has been problematic if we try to accommodate these two religions from the perspective of 'world religion'. We cannot fit them in the gamut of world religion unlike Christianity for instance. The spiritual, emotional and philosophical attachment of people in the religious domain in South Asian context is more complex to place them in a universalized palate of religion. David Gellner (2001) has out rightly rejected the concept of 'world religion' calling it a 'question-begging western, or Judaeo-Christian-derived term' (p.70). He instead classifies different forms of religion in three broad categories: soteriological, social and instrumental, where he places Buddhism as an amalgam of these three categories, whereas, Hinduism as a social religion with soteriological tendencies within. In the context of Nepal, the religious harmony of Hinduism and Buddhism is a result of existing together for ages which might not hold true for many other South Asian countries; one has outnumbered the other (in most of the cases the former being different strands of Buddhism). In Nepal, this symbol of togetherness and tolerance is exhibited through the worship of Kumari (Shakya, 2012:14). It is a beautiful sight of co-presence of two major religions, one completing the other. But can we look at it as another way of performing an act of illusion where everyone is becoming a part of it consciously or otherwise? G Samuel (2001) provides another dimension to the unseen restrained relationship of these two religions through the Newar ritual practice of *Ihi* (mock-

marriage with the *Bel* fruit) and *Barha Tayegu* (mock-menstruation and marriage with the sun), which, he argues is another form of "paying lip-service to the Brahminical obsession with domesticating and controlling female power through marriage, while avoiding real commitment to Brahmin orthodoxy" (p.85). One important criterion in the selection of Kumari is that the girls should not go through these two rituals in order to participate in the selection process. Thus, these rituals can be seen as a tool to change the status of the girls from being virgin to being married. Samuel argues that on a psychological level, the relationship between the king and Kumari is also not one-sided because she supports him but remains a virgin and does not submit to him. It is another way of establishing a balance of power between the two religions (or Newar submission to the Gorkha king of Nepal) through the symbolism of king-Kumari dynamics.

The contestations between Hinduism and Buddhism is very evident in the writing of K. B. Bhattachan (2005:49-50) who discusses about how the authoritative hand of the local administration (basically he means the Hindu side) controlled by the dominant caste groups has always tried to suppress the uneven relationship between these two religions. He states that it is this highhandedness that has succeeded to give Nepal the status of being the only Hindu nation in the world. There are various opposing factors in both the religions which he undertakes to explain in terms of absolute faith, hierarchy according to purity/impurity, existence of soul and rebirths and so on. Bhattachan also mentions the attempt to announce Buddha as an incarnation of Vishnu as a strategy to appropriate Buddhism within the folds of Hinduism which again is a very common way of popularizing Sanskrit deity and marginalizing the local ones (p.57). At a first glance, the tone of the paper might look out rightly one-sided which becomes problematic in the sense that it does not allow the reader to get a vantage position to come to a more thought-provoking conclusion. It might seem that it is an individual's view of Hinduism; however, he does mention that the paper was an outcome of many interviews with Buddhist scholars, monks and local along with a literature survey by Nepalese Buddhist scholars; also one-sided because no Hindu is involved in the study (p.61). As the information shared by him does not take into consideration the views of both sides, it denies the reader an unprejudiced overview. Keeping aside the strong show of disinclination towards Hinduism, one thing which requires us to ponder is that the religious tolerance might be just a utopian concept, created for the betterment of the rulers. We cannot ignore the individual dismissive thought towards the caretakers of Hinduism in Nepal, which can be seen as one of the many similar thoughts in a whole community, cracking open every now and then.

In an essay which is a part of doctoral research, Ally Ostrowski (2006) has analyzed what is being termed as the 'framing' of religion through a series of Nepal TV evening newscast in the year 1981. It was an experiment to see how the idea of religion (majorly Hindu yearly events) was covered and offered to the viewers. The importance of religion and religiosity that has taken a front seat in the daily lives of Nepalese people is apparently due to the poverty and instability of Nepal (Maoist insurgency) as a nation (p.4). This proliferation of belief system is channelized through the news coverage, a prospect which the royal family and the politicians use in their favor to gain support from the public by participating in various religious events (p.13). Ostrowski has rightly pointed out the discrimination in the broadcast of events according to the ratio of religious group like Buddhists and the minorities like Muslims, Christians etc. Having said that, what more needs to be seen is if the effects of these newscasts were as desirable as it was supposed to be. Ostrowski also argues that religion becomes a 'public identifier' and not a private belief to become a part of the larger part of the social network in which TV plays a crucial role (p.7).

I argue that the religious beliefs and the propagation of social norms of Nepalese people have more to do than just through the newscast because the concept of TV in Nepal is a very new phenomenon and that too it is spread in a very limited area. We cannot deny the contribution of TV in the building of opinions of influential personalities in Nepal, but that contribution can be seen in a very small amount. Also, we cannot take into account the economic and political turmoil of Nepal as the only reason for the importance of religion. Another reason which became a crucial deciding factor as against the faith and belief system was the patron influence: the role of the king in the Kathmandu-centric Nepal. It had to do more with the relation the people shared with their patrons than with one's individual devotionalism. And of course, the concept of TV did not feature in those times. It was more of a mass communication from the patron to the subjects, where TV played no role of a medium. Hence, the religious sentiment of the people of Nepal is not the only reason for the proliferation of these two religions. However, we cannot deny its role completely in the last two decades or so. William D. Tuladhar (2006) points out how important it was for the people to accept the patron's faith than one's own. Post 1768, it was "socially and economically advantageous to become a Saivámárgi, what these days is called a Hindu" (p.9). On the other hand, the patrons also tried to maintain the balance by appropriating many religious rituals in order to keep their subjects happy and faithful. The cause and effect of religious rituals at times may lead to serve political purpose. Gellner (2001) stresses on the fact that we cannot just accept a tradition

that has come across to us as it is. We have to read between the lines and see what could be the reasons considering the political aspect of "why and what it means to the people who perform the rituals" (p.61). There is a complimentary and interdependent relationship between patron and people, where the consent of people is somewhat more important as it is the acknowledgement of people that give the other side the admission to patronize. It is the immersive bond of patron, people and religion which sanctifies and legitimates the given functions and obligations towards each other, while Kumari performs the role of strengthening that bond. The rituals may or may not change with time in the guise of 'legitimate domination', but the 'central core of ritual acts and meaning'remains the same, fulfilling different needs at different or within the same time period by various patrons with the support of religion and thereafter, people (Gellner, 2001:65-66).

1.5 Transformation: Kumari and Taleju in the making

Isabella Tree has presented a narrative on how Taleju came down to the valley from Simraongarh (a part of India, now Southern Nepal), as a result of Muslim invasion by Sultan Malik Ghuyas-ud-din Tughluq. The Solar king Harisimha succumbed to his injuries, whereas his queen Devaldevi and his son Jagatsimha escaped to the valley and took refuge under the Rudra Malla, the Malla king of Bhaktapur. They took their deity Taleju to the valley who resided in a *yantra*[14] and the powerful *mantra*[15] was whispered on to Jagatsimha's ear by the dying Harishima (Tree, 2014:69-75). Tree has beautifully narrated this story with interesting observations; but she has failed to place the narrative in a definite timeline. Looking back to the historical events unfolding itself in the later part of the fourteenth century, there is an evidence to suggest a Muslim invasion in Simraongarh. Dhanavajra Vajracarya (2009), an eminent historian of Nepal has given a historical analysis of three centuries by translating the *Gopalárájavamsávalí* into Nepali from a corrupt form of Sanskrit and medieval Newari. His account of political history starts from the medieval period Nepala samvat (1-509) (AD 879-1389). He has mentioned the year 1326 as the year of Tughluq's invasion of Simraongarh and the escape of Devaladevi and her son (p.100). The most crucial

[14] *Yantra* is a symbolic diagram representing the deity.
[15] *Mantra* means a secret magical chant.

variation in both the accounts is the relation of Devaladevi to Rudra Malla. In the previous account, Tree describes Devaladevi as the princess sister of Malla, whereas in the latter account, Devaladevi is not at all related to Malla, not before Rudra Malla's daughter Nayakadevi's second marriage to Jagatsimha who takes up the throne which had become empty post Malla's death.[16] Vajracarya has analyzed the events through a political perspective referring to the increase of Devaladevi's power after Malla's death. It was seen as an opportunistic strategy to put her son into power who has been always referred to as *Karnatvanshaj* and not Malla. What is striking in the intersection of these two accounts is the subtle merging of facts and fiction into a strong bonding of history and narrative. As Vajracarya was keen to look at the political upsurge during the Malla rule, the story of Taleju might have escaped his observation. Or, maybe he was not aware of the political ramification this could take shape in the near future. John Mellowship, on the other hand, provides a very different narrative of Taleju's arrival in the Valley. He mentions that it was the Mallas who had brought their 'dynastic goddess' Taleju from India and they also followed the passing down of *mantra* from the present king to his successor through the mode of whispering. It was Taleju who replaced the former main Valley goddess Manesvari in order to claim that place. The newly appointed king Pratapa Malla (1641-74) could not receive the *mantra* due to some animosity with his father and thereafter had to be instructed by Taleju herself to worship a *Chandala* (untouchable) girl as Kumari (Mellowship, 2007:90-91). It was during the time of Pratapa Malla the importance of the Newar Buddhist priest increased to a great extent. The power of *mantra* was lost and hence the priest took the responsibility of assured power flowing from Kumari to the king.

In order to incorporate Kumari within the reach of the patrons, there was a crucial need to trasform her to a more closer identity they were familiar with. There is a thin line between transition and transformation; the former being the process and the latter the outcome of the process. Sharma (2001) has given an elaborate study on the brahminical dominance in the ritual, social and political milieu of Chamba district of Himachal Pradesh, India and its surrounding areas through appropriation and marginalisation and the counter attack of the marginalised lot. This includes various strategies like dream symbolism, inversion myths, vegetarianism and animal

[16] In *Gopalárájavamsávalí*, K. P. Malla gives an introduction in English where he asserts that Rudra Malla was Devaladevi's brother, but Vajrácárya does not confirm anything of that sort in the Nepalese translation.[16] This can be misleading to many scholars, especially those who cannot read the Nepalese version and has to depend on the English one.

sacrifice, making of sacred spaces so on and so forth. Terming it 'process of hijacking or brahmanisation, reverse sanskritization', Sharma asserts how the transition of a local deity to an appropriated sanskritic goddess creates the transformation (p.102). Thereby making the identity prominent and identical with the mainstream goddess, although keeping the local element attached to be gradually faded out in the long run. In order to understand the transformation of Kumari to Taleju and vice versa, we have to first look at both the figures and their characterstics: in their respective selves and then the changed ones. It is only then we can clearly see that the transformation has not taken place just in the case of Kumari, but Taleju as well. Not only was Kumari brought out of her community to serve various purposes be it religious, social, cultural or political, but it was Taleju as well who travelled from a different region as a result of migration, may be for the same purposes. Their two different selves were brought together in one space giving rise to an empowered image of one goddess who could not be denied owing to the co-presence of local mainstream Hindu lineage. They both had to shed some old and gain some new characteristics in the making of the fierce, yet benevolent goddess. When two different things are combined together, the product can exhibit the presence of both, or become a purely third entity devoid of both.

Carl Gustav Jung (2012) in his work argues how the worship of Mary began as a result of pagan influence of worshipping woman or Virgin Mother in the form of 'vessel of devotion' (p.6). His analysis of a Christian document the *shepherd* of Hermas, written in about A.D. 140 throws light on how the document could be seen as a reference to establish a hierarchical relationship between the slave and the ruler (mistress in this case) followed by the intervention of a spiritual aspect being thrown whenever there is an instance of that hierarchy being subverted.[17] Jung writes:

> Just as the external conditions of life force a man to perform a social function, so the collective determinants of the psyche impel him to socialize ideas and convictions. By transforming a possible social faux pas into the service of his soul after having been wounded by the dart of passion,

[17] The main character Hermas the slave gets sexually driven to his owner Rhoda after he returns back to her after many year of his freedom from slavery. As this 'earth-bound desire' is a sin committed by Hermas, the soul image of Rhoda compels Hermas to repress his erotic feeling towards her and transforms his sexual energy to a spiritual one where he no longer desires to see her as his mistress but as a divine since the worship of the woman symbolizes the worship of the soul (Jung, 2012:7-16).

> Hermas was led to accomplish a social task of a spiritual nature, which for the first time was surely of no small importance (p.11).

Jung weaves through various narratives like the above one and creates a base for his argument where medieval hymns to Virgin Mary as a vessel got associated with non-Biblical, pagan imageries like undefiled earth and unploughed field and the church followed the pagan model (p.18-19). This is an interesting account of events where narratives are assimilated and the creation of a whole new identity is formed or merged with the existing one. In the context of Taleju-Kumari dynamics, I argue that Taleju and Kumari cannot be the two faces of the same coin although it appears to be so in the given situation. There is a very unmistakably successful attempt to bring two things together: Taleju and Kumari and that we have already encountered in today's Nepal.

It is also the huge impact of narratives that have been passed on most of the time orally that have clawed in to people's consciousness. The need to construct narratives around the Taleju-Kumari worship becomes obvious when we see end number of tales having almost the same ending. There is a similar pattern whilst the character of the offender (sometimes it's the king, at other times it's the queen or the princess) being changed at times: there is an offence committed, there is reparation and then the goddess offers a solution to the offender. In an essay on the bow song tradition of Tamil Nadu, Stuart H. Blackburn (1992) discusses its relationship with patronage. He argues that bow singers are not just passive recipients of the patrons' favour, but they play an active role to 'maximize patronage' by announcing the gifts they receive from the patrons in their performance deviating from the original text about local deities (p.34). He writes:

> they incorporate some aspect of the context into the performance, and there they reshape it to suit their ends. Not surprisingly, the aspects of context they select are elements of the patronage system (p.35).

I argue that Blackburn's 'textualization of context' (p.44) which is employed to give leverage to patrons can have an adverse effect also and does not always strive to maximize patronage. It is the content of the narratives that can shape, heroize or even vilify the patrons. If we decipher the Kumari narratives we will find out that some narratives were, in fact, did quite the opposite of what Blackburn suggests. For instance, through the narratives we find out the way the Mallas were projected. Pratapa Malla, in one narrative did not receive the *mantra* and as a result of many tantric

rituals, under the guidance of Taleju started the Kumari worship. However, in another narrative he is said to have had led a corrupted life before his accession. In one incident he had raped and killed a Kumari following which he erected a large number of *lingas* in the Pashupatinath[18] which still exist to this day (Mellowship, 2007:92). We can always question the authenticity of these narratives that must have got circulated through agents, keeping in mind the enmity amongst the Malla rulers and Prithvinarayan Shah's constant attempts to rule the three cities. If Taleju belonged to the Simraongarh dynasty, then it becomes convincing that the cult of worshipping her was an outcome of religious migration post the Muslim invasion. On the other hand, if Taleju was the tutelary deity of the Mallas then what could be the possible reason for the late construction of temples dedicated to Taleju that happened in the later part of the sixteenth century and seventeenth century out of which oldest Taleju temple is situated in Bhaktapur, the city where Devaladevi is supposed to arrive first?[19] It is also strange that the neither of the survivors of Simraongarh massacre Devaladevi and Jagatsimha dedicate any temple to Taleju even after the latter took the throne. Which is why it becomes difficult to assert if Taleju ever migrated into the valley with Devaladevi and Jagatsimha as if believed, or if her worship was aready in practice through a different identity. According to Sushila Manandhar, Taleju was worshipped from the Lichhavi (fifth to ninth century) regime itself. She refers to scholars like Tirthalal Naghavani and Mary Slusser and tries to provide a third angle saying that the goddess's name was Maneshvari during the Licchavi period which changed to Taleju during the Malla period. We also cannot deny the possibility that Taleju might have travelled with the Mallas when they arrived in the Valley. One thing that is clear is that it is only during the Malla rule the status of Taleju was accentuated. Taleju was regarded as the epicenter of socio-politico-cultural and religious significance (Shrestha, 1988:11). At this conjecture, it is highly possible that the narratives must have travelled from India to the valley where it gained its powerful structure when merged with the already existing Kumari worship. But who and how Taleju was brought needs to be ascertained.

[18] Pashupatinath is a fifteenth century temple built by Licchavi king Shupuspa and is dedicated to Lord Shiva.
[19] Taleju temple of Kathmandu was built in 1564 by King Mahendra Malla and the Taleju temple of Patan was built in 1667 by Shree Niwas Malla. BhaktapurTaleju temple's details are not yet available.

1.6 From Community to *Chen*: Mobilization of Sacred Geography

The Kumari worship has been an important aspect of Newar life much before it derived enormous attention from the later kings. Kumari, as we now know her, was known as *ajima* (ancestral mother and ruler of the valley) or Vajrayogini to the Newar Buddhists and it was in the *baha* the worship used to take place (Mellowship, 2007:63). In the context of Newar community, she was more of an agrarian deity who would provide timely rain for crops, protect the valley from evils and so on. However, it is not surprising that she got included as a part of Hindu pantheon of gods and goddesses through the legitimation of sacred geography. We come across various examples in the context of South Asia especially India, where a local deity is incorporated and appropriated within the community of Hindu mainstream gods and goddesses. In the context of Kumari, one such example of incorporation is seeing Kumari as the embodiment of Durga. Kumari becomes one of the power-emanating ferocious mothers out of the *Astamatrikas* (eight mothers or consorts of Hindu male gods), whose shrines are situated in the boundaries of the Kathmandu Valley (Rajbhandari, 1988-89:4; Mellowship, 2007:53-54; Tree: 2014:50). They are believed to protect the Valley from outside forces. Newari people have different terms for the area, for instance, *dhvaka dune* (inside) and *dhvaka pine* (outside) the gate. They still believe that the area beyond gate is unsafe (Tree, 2014:51). In a compiled work on the goddess Kali, Sarah Caldwell (2005) looks at Kali worship in South Asia as a cult at the margin. She talks about how Aryan and Mughal influence grew through their invasion on one hand, and on the other hand, they "co-opted existing goddess-worship traditions, Sanskritizing them and appropriating them into high-caste temples" (p.261). Another example can be seen through Gananath Obeyesekere's (1984) extensive research on the cult of goddess Pattini. The origin of this cult is debatable but he does come to a conclusion saying that it was originated as a Buddhist and Jain deity as against the popular belief of it being a Hindu deity. But Obeyesekere does not fail to point towards the sanksritization of the cult through its transformation into Bhagavatí-Kalí with the help of myths (p.540-550; 590). The assimilation of one identity of a deity to another from, a local deity to a mainstream one, in a non-violent process, more so with full consent opens a big possibility for much of the earlier features to dry down in the long run. It also gives helping hand to the ruling patrons to get immersed in the

deification of their supernatural deities, as a means of reaching those domains which their own mere mortal identity could not.

In her autobiography, former Kumari of Kathmandu Rashmilya Shakya mentions that the institution of Royal Kumari was prevalent even before kumaris were being worshipped as the incarnation of Taleju. She writes, "No one knows how old it is. Some say it goes back to the 13th century, but this was nearly two hundred years before the arrival of goddess Taleju herself" (Shakya, 2012:13). It is only with the adoption of Taleju as their deity and her association with Kumari that the Malla rule gained immense support from the people of the Valley, Hindus and Buddhists alike. During the rule, another interesting twist happened when the last Malla king of Kathmandu Jaya Prakasha Malla constructed a palace for the then Kumari in 1757 (Tree, 2014:302,159). He brought her from the comfort of her community and established a palace Kumari *Chen* for her inside the Royal Palace compound, giving access to the Hindu monarchs whenever they wanted (Tree, 2014:165). Kumari became a symbol of protection for Malla and the future kings. But apart from the symbol of protection the *Chen* signifies, Tree has noted the existence of the religious contestation between Hindus and Buddhists when it came to its structure. The temple had a distinct Hindu iconography and was constructed to perform royal Hindu worship. It was only four years later many Buddhist features were incorporated as the Gorkha[20]threat increased when-

> the pressure of Buddhist taboo reasserted itself, compelling the Hindu king to bow, once more to the prescriptions of Vajrayana and provide accommodation for full Tantric Buddhist worship of the royal Kumari now living at the Kumari *Chen* (Tree, 2014:161).

The purpose of constructing the *Chen* for Kumari was not only to gain political support from the unemployed Newari artisans (Mellowship, 2007:102), but it was also a last resort to save his dying kingdom from the animosity of his brothers and Prithvinarayan Shah's invasion. It not only showed his obeisance to Taleju and Kumari, but more of an external symbolic gesture of becoming favorable to both. The arrival of Kumari into the palace can be seen by both the religious groups in different manner. The fact that Newars worship Kumari not as Taleju, but as Vajrayogini or

[20] Prithvinarayan Shah's kingdom before he invaded the Kathmandu Valley in 1768.

Bodhisattva[21] says a lot about the inner differences. Kumari might have come out of her community but her community identity still remains. Kumari's journey from the interior of a *baha* to the interior of *Chen* marks her transformation from an agrarian community deity to an incarnation of a Hindu fierce goddess.

As Kumari travelled from her community to the royal premises, and her identity transformed it did raise several questions. Giving such a high status to a girl-child could have been an outcome of many political venture intermixed with religious sentiments. But the religious sentiment of whom: The Hindus, the Buddhists or the king? To understand this we need to analyze the political situation when Jaya Prakasha Malla became the king in 1736. He did not have much support from the kings of Bhaktapur and Patan and his kingdom was in constant danger of foreign invasion. On the other hand, in a meticulously planned manner the Gorkha prince Pritihvinarayan Shah befriended the King of Bhadgaon (now Bhaktapur) Ranajit Malla's son Viranarasimha Malla and stayed there as a guest. He came to know the enmity between Bhadgaon and Kathmandu rulers. Unaware of Shah's motive, Malla dug his own grave and when he realized his mistake, it was already too late. Shah took this information on his stride and attacked Kathmandu some years later after he became the King of Gorkha (Shah, 1989:82-83). Kathmandu was not easy to give in even after Jaya Prakash Malla escaped and took refuge in the *pitha*[22] of Guhyeshvari only to return with much vigor with *khadga* (magic sword) in his hand. It was after this event that Malla discussed with his Vajracharya priests who in trun advised him to build a palace and a *ratha* (chariot) for a Shakya Kumari and keep her within the boundary of royal palace. This information is debated by the Hindu advisors who stress on the fact that it was necessary for the King to appease Taleju in every possible way, and the best way to do was ask forgiveness for any offences he might have committed by worshipping an untouchable virgin girl (Mellowship, 2007:96-97).

In South India, a popular deity Gangamma is believed to reside in the body of a Matangi woman (a sweeper caste) during the Gangamma festival (Caldwell, 2005:264-265). This used to alleviate her status during the course of the festival, but, however, the roles of possession are no longer performed by the women and is handed down or taken by the middle caste men (Caldwell,

[21] Bodhisattva is another form of Buddha.

[22] *Pitha* symbolizes a powerful point.Guhyeshvari is believed to be that point where Sati's private part had fallen as Shiva was taking her dead body all around the earth and his dance trembled the earth. Vishnu tried to stop Shiva by cutting Sati's body into 50 pieces and each of her body parts fell in different parts.

2005:266). What we see here is the way the caste of the virgin girl is specified in the narratives which also hints at the intention of the narrative what the narrative is pointing at. In most of the cases, the caste is mentioned Shakya; however, in some she is mentioned to be from a caste that performs 'some base and polluting occupation' (Tree, 2014:157). The Newars do not consider themselves belonging to a polluting caste and nor do they have a lower status in the society. They are at equal par with the other Newari priestly caste of Vajracharya. This notion of polluting caste thus comes from a Hindu understanding of caste hierarchy. One important point to discuss here is how the formation of various groups in the 2000-year-old *Newar* community is influenced by the Hindu caste system to a great extent. Michael Allen (2000) discusses that the influence had been so strong that they divided the whole community into many different groups. The concept had penetrated into the community giving rise to categorization of duties in the social sphere and they related to each other by referring to the 'notions of relative purity (p.166).' Gerard Toffin writes that it was the Shah rule and the dominance of *Parbatiya*[23] elite who supported the rule that was reshaping the rituals. The *Raj Gubhaju* (Newar Buddhist Priest) earned a great respect during the Malla rule and so the task of all the important occasions was therefore given to him (Mellowship, 2007:106). Post 1768, the Hindu priest came to be associated with the king and started to be called *Mul Purohit* (Royal Priest). They started taking care of all the social and religious events of royalty. One can see the importance of Hindu priest during the *nityapuja* (daily worship) of the Kumari inside her chamber which has to be conducted by the *Mul Purohit* only. Without this worship Kumari's daily life does not begin. The Newar priest, on the other hand, does not necessarily have to perform the daily worship and his presence is not mandatory for all the affairs related to Kumari. The obligatory presence of Brahmin priests the rituals itself questions the very political undercurrents of the tradition when it was actually a Newar tradition to begin with. Even in the selection process of Kumari, the task of *Raj Gubhaju* is limited to summoning the families of the *bahas* to bring their daughters for the procedure. As the Kumari worship moved out of the community, the local and community was erased, and Kumari is assimilated with new features with basic structure of the Kumari worship remaining the same; the skeleton of the past remains as a vague memory.

[23] Here *Parbatia* refers to hill-dwelling Brahmin.

C. J. Fuller (1988), in his work on South India offers two broad categories of mainstream Hindu deities based on the observation of purity in terms of eating meat (p.22). He finds that the meat-eating deities are the ones who are worshipped by the non-Brahmin priests and low caste devotees, whereas, the vegetarian deities are the one who are under the care of Brahmin priests and worshipped by high and low castes both. He also found the co-existence of characteristics of two deities in one single deity in Tamil Nadu village a deity called Mariyamman. She is believed to possess the head of a Brahmin and the body of an untouchable. According to a myth, in a fit of rage Shiva beheaded her and later her head was mistakenly attached to the body of an untouchable Chakkiliyan body. Fuller analyzes her body into three status-high, intermediate and low: high when she is worshipped inside her temple and given vegetarian food, intermediate when she is taken out of the temple and given meat as food and low when an animal is sacrificed in her worship. The high form of Mariyamman is upheld by the Adisaiva Brahmin priests whereas the other two forms of deities are reserved for the public mostly low castes who are not allowed to touch the deity inside the temple premises. In another instance, Fuller discloses another low caste deity Cellattamman who is believed by her low caste devotees to be married to Brahmin deity Sundaresvara when she comes to visit his temple in an annual ritual event of bathing together. The low caste worshippers claim that she is married to Sundaresvara in the event, whereas, the Brahmin priests dismiss this claim of link to a lowly Cellattamman limiting the bathing as just one ritual to gain Sundaresvara's power that takes place inside the temple, when her caste is sidelined for the moment (Fuller, 1988:29). The custom of worshipping low-caste women as incarnation of goddesses is not a new phenomenon in South Asia, but on the other hand, the dismissive nature of Brahmin side as regards to low caste is purely discernible.

Antonio Gramsci (2010) suggests that the inter-relationship between religion, state and party is 'indissoluble' and the passage has to remain free of obstacles for the achievement of the 'historico-politico development' (p.266). He divides the society into two parts-civil and political, whereby the latter is synonymous to the state itself. In his view, it is the ruling class which has control over both the societies. It is through hegemony or a silent and invisible way of getting consent from the led, that submits the power to the rulers and those who do not consent becomes the enemy of the state. The cultural hegemony is a non-violent manner of acquiring the power in the hands of a few who create a model that is to be followed like a sacred work of art; not by force but by consent. I argue that the religious syncretism which appears to be consensus one is rather

contentious. We can see how the hegemonic apparatus of the state that is put into practice in order to achieve that consent be it the appropriation through ritual, submission to the brahminical influence or the gradual erasure of Buddhist presence.

1.7 Ritual Presence of Taleju Promotes Patronage

Evan Thompson's (2001) study of empathy and consciousness analyzes the intersubjective relationship between self and the other forms on the basis of consciousness. He argues when the self and the other encounters which he calls 'the two-organism or self-other event', a consciousness of each other's presence is created out of the encounter (p.4). In the relationship between Kumari and the audience what remains ever-present is the consciousness of the presence of Taleju that not only manifests Kumari but also promotes and strengthens patronage. During the public worship, Kumari and spectators create an immersive bond in which this awareness of Taleju and subsequenty the patron is constantly enmeshed together along with Kumari's presence. It is the cognitive quality of the moment that arises the state of empathy in between the two selves of Taleju and Kumari. In my understanding of Kumari what becomes very crucial is the relationship between Kumari and Taleju, because it cannot be taken for granted that Kumari is the incarnation of Taleju and hence she needs to be worshipped for that. What gives Taleju a certain symbolic presence is the inter-subjectivity between Kumari and Taleju; a specific code of conduct frames the image of Taleju in the audience. It is the consciousness of Kumari that plays the role of Taleju in a specified generational pattern evoking empathy and awe amongst the spectator. It is the awareness of Kumari's self to accommodate Taleju's self and hence re-present Taleju. The constant reminder to the girl that she is believed to embody a goddess does put a performance pressure on her, whether she understands or not; an enclosed and guarded consciousness. She cannot deny the presence because it is been ascertained and has to be followed as per the traditions whether she actually feels the presence or not that is completely personal and has nothing to do or not taken into account as far as the Kumari-Taleju relationship is concerned.

Peggy Phelan (2005) has viewed the idea of presence in performance studies as a movement from the 'grammar of words' to the 'grammar of the body' through the concept of

metaphor and metonymy (p.150). It is only through the understanding of metonymy that the presence of the living body can be explored which she illustrates through the example the phrase 'the kettle is boiling' (Ibid.). Here the water and kettle is not the same thing which symbolizes the metaphor. It is rather the status of the water which makes the kettle boil in the case of metonymy. When a performer performs what a spectator sees are the various performative elements created by the body and space, thereby making the body disappear, and what remains is fragments in the form of performance. Metonymy helps to form that idea through its additive and associative character. Phelan asserts that the body is metonymic of 'self, of character, of voice, of "presence"' (Ibid.). It gives a new identity to an established one or retaining both or various features in one. What is it that assures the presence of Kumari in a particular space? In the case of Kumari, the ritual presence of Taleju is installed in her through the validation of narratives, rituals and performances. This ritual presence of Taleju gives a metonymical meaning to the identity to Kumari and strengthens the position of the patron. This metonymical relationship of Taleju and Kumari co-creates a theatrical embodiment, where the body of Kumari becomes the vessel of devotion which the devotees can identify with Taleju; Kumari's gestures become Taleju's expression. Taleju presides where Kumari resides. Her presence can work as the realization of Taleju. Kumari becomes the vessel to accommodate Taleju in a physical, psychological and philosophical term. Kumari's bodily presence gives shape to the virtual presence of Taleju. This presence of Taleju in Kumari can be studied through the concept of heirophany which Mircea Eliade (1987) breaks it down in a simpler term stating the manifestation of sacred into something ordinary which 'shows itself' and makes the man aware of the sacredness that is entirely different from the profane (p.11). What can be an important take away from this concept is the possibility of performativity in the act of 'showing' the sacred whose presence is accepted without doubt. When a sacred identity is manifested over an ordinary one that presentation becomes of utmost importance. Eliade argues that it is not their own identity of being a stone, tree or any object that alleviates their status, but the presence of sacredness within them for the time being that draws this connection (Ibid.). In this act of transformation, the stone is no longer a stone but acquires an aura. Likewise, Kumari also performs the role of transcending her own mortal identity and re-presents not herself but Taleju to the spectators. The presence of sacredness in Kumari shows itself and that exhibition is validated only after the spectators approve that presence by worshipping her.

Shakya has mentioned that her own experience regarding the presence of Taleju has always been very powerful. However, she does not fail to acknowledge that the experience did not come at the beginning of her tenure as Kumari. She writes:

> I am not sure at what age I first began to notice feeling different whenever the naga necklace was put on, but wearing it I suddenly felt myself to be in some way apart from and superior to the people around me, and I never felt like talking to anyone (2012:37).

The feeling different phase can be interpreted in various ways. Even her feeling has changed from normal to superior one. Getting treated as goddess all throughout her tenure, her mortal identity of being somebody's daughter or sister remained undeveloped for a good number of years. It is possible that she might not even have considered those identities other than that of a goddess also existed, waiting to be discovered and lived. What she presented to the spectators is what remained concealed within the interiors of Taleju temple; a glimpse of the inaccessible transcendental world. Her radiating presence in front of the kings, the devotees, the political enthusiasts asks them to realize the dark mysteries of knowing a powerful migrant goddess.

1.8 Domestication of Goddess

In an essay on Kalighat temple of Calcutta, Sanjukta Gupta (2005) mentions how a specific Haldar family's Vaishnavite tradition influences the Tantric cult of Daksinakáli so much so that even the deity's physical attributes get 'toned down' to a beautiful goddess in place of a fierce-looking one, in order to match with a certain class's religious sensitivities which she prefers to call it 'domestication of a Goddess' (p.61). I see a similar set of traits in the case of Kumari in which there has been an attempt to tone down her earlier identity. This has been carried out through the politics of patronage.

Eliade suggested that the 'reactualization of primordial events' in the present time is necessary to make the present time sacred (p.68-69). The annual events take place to keep the sacredness in flow as against the presence of profane everywhere. But is it the only reason for the

occurrences of sacred events: to keep the time and the space sacred? I argue that this is more than that because it cannot be a simple linear relation between events and sacredness. What are being avoided here are the complexities that religion binds not only with the society, but also through the power relations. The frequency of occurrences of sacred events functions as a politically-abled mnemonic device which does not let the power structure of religion and society escape through the human mind. It works like the ticking of the controlling clock in every interval without fail. Eliade's argument might have a very strong religious base, but viewed from the perspective of the performance studies, the argument becomes too simple. The emerged problematic serves as a point of departure from religion studies to the performance one. The appearance of Kumari in annual events can serve as a suitable example to illustrate this point.

Kumari makes only thirteen public appearances in a year and lives inside the Kumari *Chen* for the rest of the year. If we look at the occasions when she appears in public, apart from two Buddhist events, the rest of them are Hindu festivals.[24] Although Kathmandu and Patan Kumari (Fig. 5) have tutors at the Kumari *Chen* itself, some of the rules are bended for the Bhaktapur, Kumari. For instance, she is allowed to go to school (Fig. 6), but when she is dressed as Kumari the rules are almost the same. The reason of these limited appearances is never met with an explanation, although a certain section of the society (mostly non-Newari) does criticize this custom of denying the basic human rights to the small girls, but they obviously fall on deaf ears. This idea of appearance and disappearance cannot be overlooked and needs a thorough analysis. It is regarded as a good omen to catch a glimpse of Kumari in her regalia when she is considered to be powerful. But that happens very rarely, only if one goes to her palace and waits to see her outside the golden-latticed window, where she generally presents herself for the sake of the tourists once in a day, preferably late afternoon (Shakya, 2012:27-28). Other than this, it is only during festivals like *Indra Jatra, Rato Machhindranath Jatra, Seto Machhindranath Jatra* and so on that she makes her appearance in public. Kumari's physical appearance works wonders as she comes out of her palace in all her regalia with a strikingly red-painted forehead, bordering with yellow paste, a thick kohl lined up to her temple, with a third eye stuck on her forehead, and her hair tied in a topknot sitting uptight balancing the cosmic order of the world, along with the *naga mala* (serpent necklace embellished with nine different gems). While the act of seeing gives pleasure to

[24] Kathmandu Kumari visits to Tham Bahi in the month of July/Aug and a Buddhist festival Samyak Dan in the month of Sep/Oct that happens every twelve years (Mellowship, 2007:204-206).

the spectator, it also intensifies and supposedly brings a transforms the wearer (Ibid. 37-38). Kumari's appearance becomes one of the important features of the worship as it ushers magnificent affect amongst the participants. On the other hand, are we missing out on the need for these 'limited or controlled appearances'?[25] There have been two views regarding Kumari's appearance: i) it is done to please the Kumari who might want to see the world outside her palace. ii) it is her duty as a goddess to attend the festivals (Mellowship, 2007:112).

Phelan analyses a work of French-born artist Sophie Calle who exhibited the description of stolen artworks by interviewing visitors, museum staff who had seen those paintings before they were being stolen in the galleries of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston in the year 1990 (Phelan, 2005:146). So Calle replaced those absent paintings with their descriptions, presenting their presence albeit in a texted manner. Phelan argues that "the more dramatic the appearance, the more disturbing the disappearance" (p.148). It is the disappearance of those paintings which ensues presence of myriad characteristics which must not have crossed onlooker's attention. The absence/disappearance in here can be equally responsible for presenting the presence elsewhere; the absence of the paintings provides a space for the memory of the witnesses to bring the paintings into the scenario thus presenting the presence. Every presentation of the presence of a performance is counted because no two performances are the same regardless of the same content or same performer for that matter. The presence of the subject speaks a new language with each and every appearance as well as disappearance. Phelan argues that even the repetition of same performance is also deemed different; making reproduction impossible to achieve. The relationship between the performer and the spectator is never equally symmetrical, there is always a room for the possibility of asymmetrical power. The performer or the subject may be at the mercy and control of the spectator's gaze. It is a theatrical exchange between both that gives rise to a third space of power dissemination where the appearance or disappearance of the performer moves the spectators to a different direction of physical, philosophical and psychological enhancements or degradation.

While Phelan discusses about presence through disappearance, J. Thompson brings presence through affect it generates from its appearance. He discusses about the presence as

[25] Allen has mentioned that the veneration and worship of young girls on the basis of purity is 'the most effective and invidious form of control' of one human on another (Allen, 1990:6).

another departure from meaning making process. To illustrate his point he talks about how the face of a person functions as affect producing device and also a reminder to the onlooker (I am assuming both performer/spectator) how the face can always generate an impartial knowledge. It is this limitation in perceiving fuller understanding which 'operates at the level of affect' (Thompson, 2009:162) in one level and also the awareness of the presence of body in a specific shared space. He argues that the performance performs the role of "creating an intense 'metapolitical' moment that prepares people for recognizing the face of the other as an appeal that they cannot refuse" (p.171). The movement of recognizable energies between bodies produces a distinct reaction in the form of a theatrical encounter. This engagement of awareness, affect and response leads to an aesthetic content of Kumari and the audience. In the appearance and disappearance of Kumari, there is a sense of loss, a vigorous attempt to get immersed in her presence, and a renewal of creating that moment of shared affect that happens with every non-reproductive performance.

Caldwell in her study asks why the goddesses are kept hidden and displayed at certain intervals. According to her, it is important because the women are 'the metaphorical centers' be it the home, the womb or the temple (2005:264-265). This can be one of the philosophical explanation, but, however I differ from it. In case of Kumari, her appearances are limited to festivals that pull a great crowd. If the number of appearances are not put in check, then she might not generate as much excitement and curiosity amongst the audience as she does now. Her image of a powerful goddess does expect her to remain secret and hidden from the public eye; an image that is meant for short displays to continue the alluring mystical component in every possible way. In an interview, an former Kumari Amita Shakya's (1991-2001) uncle Bhuwan Man Shakya says that Kumaris should get pensions after they retire from the post because it is her appearance which generates income for the government in terms of tourism, hotel and so on (Journeyman Pictures, 2015).

The story of Kumari has always been met with fear and gory responses for her association with a ferocious Taleju who hunts down demons, pleases herself with the blood of the sacrificed animals and the frightening initiation at the dead of night (Shakya, 2012:55, Tree, 2014:6). However, Rashmila Shakya has refuted these claims and termed them as rumors. The initiation is not false totally, but the reports are exaggerated in order to generate interest and curiosity. The image of Taleju and hence Kumari is aggravated to an extent that Taleju's demon-slaughtering

image overshadows the Bodhisattva image of Kumari; the former's fierce side is heightened when incorporated in the latter. It is the opposite of what has happened in the case of Kálí in Kálighát temple. It is the powerful and enigmatic appearance of eighteen-armed Taleju, yielding deadly weapons that is exhibited through Kumari; an appearance who cannot be ridiculed on any ground. It is the Kumari's stern and controlled passive expression that contains the ritualized possession of Taleju restricting it to her body, not allowing it to manifest it outside, for instance in the form of blood.

Kumari's expression reveals some of the intricate performative meanings. Kumari's face appears stern and she is required to maintain that composure with her silent and unsmiling face. Kumari thinks it to her 'duty' to follow these codes when she appears to the outside world be it the ruling heads, devotees, tourists or spectators (Shakya, 2012:28). The question is who choreographs these expressions and categorizes her duties: the patrons, the caretakers living in the palace who keep a watch on Kumari all day long or the Kumari herself? Preeti Shakya (2001-2008) (Fig. 7) have been little different from the rest of the previous Kumaris as far as her behavior as a goddess was concerned. She was seen smiling at her devotees during her public appearances. In the *Indra Jatra* festival on the very first day of her appearance, she had fallen asleep in her chariot amidst so much of crowd and noise of the other performers. According to her caretakers, it was the first time in the history of the festival anything of that sort had happened. On the next two days, she did not sleep but she did smile and made faces at the spectators which was also very unlikely of a Kumari to do so and it was seen as 'indecorous' (Tree, 2014:229-230). It was an unlikely behavior because it did not go along the same line of how a Kumari is supposed to behave or what her duty asks of her. Her behavior was of course taken as a bad omen for the days to come as Nepal's monarchial lifeline was beginning to decay. And it was in the year 2008 she had to step down when Maoist government took charge and replaced her with 3 years old Matina Shakya even before Preeti's term was over. In another incident where the government authorities stripped a Kumari of her title happened in 2007 when Bhaktapur Kumari Sajani Shakya went to the US while serving as Kumari to promote a British documentary film on living goddesses. The Chief of the government trust Jai Prasad Regmi said that it is forbidden for a Kumari to leave her country and go to another country while holding the post (The New York Times, 2007). This brings us to a much required question: what does power signify and who exercises it? Is it the external authority that has the power to decide whether Taleju resides in Kumari or not? Or, is it the internal

resonating empowered presence of a goddess that changes the rules to be an exception? These incidents throw some light on the unseen hands that actually perform the thread-holding acts.

1.9 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to highlight some aspects of Kumari worship in context of patronage and the idea of transformation of the cult and the identity of Kumari, which can be of immense necessity to understand the complexities of it. The heavy influence of tantric rituals on the religious, social and political life of Nepal is clearly perceptible which is reflected in the powerful status offered to Kumari worship. Whoever exercised patronage over the rituals had a control over the religious, socio-cultural and political life of Nepal. This hegemony could be achieved through the consent of the public, who on the other hand would never question Kumari's approval. The strategic decision to bring Kumari out of the community not only garnered support for the king, but it also brought the community out into public. The transformation of Kumari to Taleju or vice versa brings into discussion the discourse of religion, caste and the political utilization of these both by the hierarchical Brahminical system. It also opens up the performative elements in the transformation process through the questions of patronizing narratives, rituals, creation of bond between patron, people with the help of religious sentiments, idealization of religious tolerance through Kumari, domestication of goddess and so on. The ambiguity of ritual is held for long because it is only in the presence of ambiguousness that the meaning and interpretation are concealed, thus giving advantage to a handful of institutions to create meaning as a source and license of performing and spectaclizing power.

Chapter II

From Ritual to Spectacle: Politics of Public Worship

2.1 Introduction

The Serpent king of the valley Karkot Naga was very grateful to a Jyapu, a Newari farmer who had healed the eyes of his Queen. He rewarded the farmer with a bhoto, a gem-embroidered vest. One day as the farmer was away in his fields, a ghost stole the vest. It was only during the festival of Rato Machhindranath Jatra, the farmer saw the ghost amidst the crowd in a human form wearing the same vest. This resulted in a quarrel that attracted everybody's attention towards them. At the end it was decided that the vest should be kept in the custody of Rato Machhindranath since both the parties could not provide any evidence that could decide who the vest really belonged to. It was also decided that the bhoto would be displayed on the last day of Jatra every year to give an opportunity to anyone who wanted to claim it with ample evidence. (Ranjitkar, 1998:28)

The narrative is enacted on the last day of the *Machhindranath Jatra* and is known as the *Bhoto Jatra.* A Nepalese life can never be complete without festival cultures that have made home into the minds and hearts of people. The *jatra*s (chariot festival) and various other annual festivals of Nepal lends a performative color and meaning to the socio-religious and political life of its people. Nepal houses many deities (local and otherwise) and many temples are dedicated to them where the devotees can worship them in private. However, once in a year these deities leave their respective abodes and come to the streets in their chariots to receive worship in public. Almost all the festivals are combinedly worshipped by the Hindus and the Buddhists, drawing in devotees and spectators from all around the valley. The unique character of these festivals is that they have braved the test of space, time and politics in Nepalese society. It is not just another example of religious landscape being turned into a political one, but definitely an interesting co-existence of both; contesting, if not co-opting each other.

This chapter aims to put forward the idea of spectacle and its political use through the appearance of Kumari in three different procession-based festivals in the Kathmandu Valley: *Rato Machhindranath Jatra, Seto Machhindranath Jatra* and *Indra Jatra*. It provides the various facets of these festivals where different performances of ritual were inserted, appropriated and introduced to accentuate the political milieu at different times. Thinking through these festivals, this chapter tries to unravel the idea of sacred space, which I see as a main opening through the mentioned festivals. Alongside this idea the chapter will try to shape its argument: the sacred space as a 'contested space' or 'consented space', domination of spectacle within the sacred space, the politics of being visible within the space, the role of efficacy to demonstrate the relationship between spectators, Kumari and the State and questioning Kumari's appearance as a divine or political presence.

2.2 *Rato Machhindranath Jatra* of Patan

Rato Machhindranath Jatra or *Bunga Dyah Jatra* (Fig. 8) is one of the most important festivals in Nepal in which the Patan Kumari appears.[26] T.N. Rajbhandari (1988-89) states that in the *vamshavali* (annal) it is mentioned king Narendradev (635A.D.-671 A.D.) had started the chariot festival (p.3). *Rato Machhindranath Jatra* of Bungamati is considered the longest street festival in the city of Patan as it is being celebrated for almost two months with the help of *Guthi Sansthan*[27] (community organization) and government support. *Machhindranath* is also called *Karunamaya* or *Avalokitesvara* (the compassionate one) and is worshipped by both the Hindu and Buddhist communities of the valley. The chariot festival takes place beginning on the 4th day of *Bachhalà* (April-May), according to the lunar Nepal Sambat calendar. The *Jatra* culminates with *Bhoto Jatra* in June after a government official displays the *bhoto* to the audience in the presence of head of the state (the President has replaced the king after the abolition of monarchy in 2008), eminent

[26] There are two Rato Machhindranaths or *Bunga Dyah* (in Newari) in Nepal: One is the Machhindranath of Bungamati and the other is the Machhindranath of Chovar, Kirtipur. Rato Machhindranath of Bungamati resides in Bungamati for 6 months and the next 6 months in Patan. *Rato* means red, *machhe* means far away land or fish, *indra* means the rain god and *nath* means the master of all. Thus, this *Jatra* sands for the red colored rain god.

[27] *Guthi Sansthan* consists of the families of Newar community who provide financial help for the functioning of the festival.

guests and Patan Kumari. After the culmination of the festival, the chariot is dismantled and kept aside for the next year, the deity is taken to Bungamati temple and placed inside after purification ritual where he resides for six months before being taken to Patan temple. Every year the procession starts from Patan to Bungamati except for the twelfth year when it starts and ends in Bungamati. For example, the last twelfth year cycle was held in June 2015.

Legend has it that during the reign of Bhaktapur king Narayandev in around 650 A.D., the Kathmandu valley had faced a twelve-year long drought which forced the kings of Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Patan to come up with a solution. It was informed by the tantric priest Shantikar Bajracharya that the deity Gorakhnath was meditating by sitting above the serpents who were responsible for providing water to the valley. He suggested that they should bring Gorakhnath's master Machhindranath to the valley to break his meditation. Listening to his suggestion Narayandev embarked on a journey to a far off land along with the Vajracharya priest Bandhudatta of Kathmandu and a farmer from Lalitpur (Patan) named Rathanchakra (Gellner, 2005:764). They learnt that the mother of Machhindranath was not ready to part from her son. As a result, the priest turned Machhindranath into a bee and trapped him in a *kalash* (flask) and brought him to the valley. Hearing the news of his master's arrival, Gorakhnath broke his meditation and stood up releasing the serpents bringing rain to the water-deprived valley. Narayandev felt grateful to Machhindranath and he decided to build a temple and dedicate the festival in his name as a token of respect. However his wish to build a temple in his city of Bhaktapur did not materialize due to some trick resulting in two temples in the city of Patan instead (Ranjitkar, 1998:26). The *Rato Machhindranath Jatra* is a re-enactment of the celebration of rain which is the harbinger of health and happiness to the people of the Valley. This narrative sows the seed for the celebration of *Rato Machhindranath Jatra*, which produces the idea of journey and re-creation of the celebration in a spectacular way.

The festive spirit gains momentum with the manufacturing of the sixty feet tall chariot in the month of February by the Ba Dhais caste and repainting of the eyes of Bhairava in the wheels and other parts of the chariot by the Pun caste; both the castes belong to the Newar community. The chariot is made in the shape of a temple with enough space around it for the attendants called Panjus to move freely while the chariot is in motion. The festival starts with *nhawan* (bathing) and painting ceremony of the deity by the Nekujus caste a fortnight before the *Jatra* begins. After the

bath the deity is brought in a palanquin and chariot moves around the streets of the city amidst the devotees and spectators. The procession starts and ends with three round of fires from the *Guru ko Paltan*[28] (Fig. 9) from Bungamati via Pulchowk and every day the chariot is pulled for a couple of hours and stopped at an open space for the devotees to worship. It goes on for several weeks till the chariot reaches Jawalakhel open ground for the closing ceremony where the government officials displays the *bhoto* earning its name as *Bhoto Jatra* (Fig. 10). During the entire festival period, the chariot is pulled by various sections of the society depending on the locality the chariot passes by. Even one day is reserved for the women who pull the chariot for around 150 meters early in the morning. The procession weaves myths and legends as it passes through various spaces. For instance, S. B. Ranjitkar discusses a legend when the chariot passed through Pulchowk it was attacked by ghosts and goblins in the midway and the chariot pullers had a hard time to pull the chariot. As a result, the Bhairavas who were guarding the wheels of the chariot had to rescue them from the onslaught. Afterwards the place is called *Ekantakuna* (quiet corner) and even to this day the chariot pullers pull the chariot quietly during the night to avoid any disruptions from the unwanted supernatural elements (Ranjitkar, 1998:27).

In this study, I would focus more on the *Bhoto Jatra* and the events that occur on the last day of the festival. The festival has the some of the most spectacular events in the whole festival in which the President, high dignitaries and Patan Kumari participate. The festival ground exhibits the co-presence of two different source of power: political and divine. According to observers, there have been several changes in the festival- manufacturing of ritual that the spectacle is given more weightage than the ritual itself. For these reasons, the study of festivals *Rato Machhindranath Jatra* and *Bhoto Jatra* in particular becomes important. The legend that is passed on regarding the *Jatra* itself bears the fact that *Bhoto Jatra* is a later addition to the *Rato Machhindranath Jatra*. Ranjitkar confirms this and argues that Nepali people have continued to accommodate these festivals "without questioning but rather adding new activities over time" (p.25).

The final day has many events lined up where the first half is reserved for the worship of the deity and in the second half the performance reaches its zenith as the music of *dhime* (drum) and *bhusya* (cymbals) pervades in the air with *Guru ko Paltan*'s flutists and musicians craftily

[28] Guru's army in Prithvinarayan Shah's army uniform.

making their way through the anticipating crowd without losing patience and a single beat.[29] As this happens on the periphery, the centre-staged chariot demands attention as one of the priests climbs to the top of the sixty feet high chariot and throws a copper disc plate towards the ground amidst the cheering crowd to predict the future of that year. It is believed that if the plate falls with its face down it means a good year lies ahead of us. The *bhoto* is then displayed from the chariot by the government official moving around the chariot temple in all the direction. He repeats this action thrice giving ample opportunities to the audience to not only have a better view of the bejeweled vest. The act of diplaying also gives a sense of ownership to the spectators. This involves a response from the spectators to come forward and participate in the dialogue. The day is a declared public holiday in the Kathmandu Valley pulling thousands of spectators from the entire Valley. As the events take place in and around the chariot, the Patan Kumari sits on her public throne watching the *Jatra* and blessing her devotees in between. It is also because of her public appearance that many worshippers come in large numbers to receive her blessings apart from watching the *Jatra*. Apart from the spectators who flock into the venue, even the head of the state and other dignitaries attend the event just before the *bhoto* is about to be displayed. They do not leave before the President receives the Kumari's blessing in the full public view while the media takes a big coverage of the meeting. Media coverage is a very recent development that started in the year 2009, after the monarchy was abolished. Prior to this the King used to perform this role as he was considered as the first worshipper of the deities of the Valley. As the day comes to an end, the festival also winds up for another year and the deities return to their respective abodes away from the public glare, with the lights fading away into oblivion.

2.3 *Seto Machhindranath Jatra* of Kathmandu

Seto Machhindranath, believed to be another facet of *Karunamaya* (the compassionate one) is being worshipped in the Kathmandu Valley as one of the principle deities of Hindus as

[29] The army puts on the same sort of uniform that Prithvinarayan Shah's army had when they had invaded the Kathmandu Valley to re-enact their victory procession.

Machhindranath and by the Buddhists as *Avalokitesvara*.[30] The *Seto Machhindranath Jatra* (Fig. 12) or *Jana Baha Dya Jatra* (in Newari) is a three days long annual chariot festival in Kathmandu on the *Chaitra Sukla Ashtami* (March-April) according to the lunar Nepal Sambat calendar organized by *Guthi Sansthan* and government support. The festival is said to be started by one of the two Malla kings Pratapa Malla or Yaksha Malla although it is not confirmed who actually started it or was it in practice even before the Mallas. The story goes to the time when Kantipuri (Kathmandu) was such a pure place that every individual went to heaven after death due to their veneration to Swayambhunath. When the God of death Yamaraj came to know of this, he also went to worship the deity. On his way back he was captured by Yaksha Malla and his tantric priest and asked for immortality. Since Yamraj could not fulfill the wish since he himself was a mortal, he asked the help of Arya Awalokiteshwor (Seto Machhindranath) to rescue him. As a result, the deity rescued him and asked the king to build a temple where the two rivers Kalmati and Bagmati meet. A chariot procession was started every year so that the deity could visit all those worshippers who could not move and bless them to have a long and healthy life (Tandukar, 2011).

The festival commences with an elaborate bathing ceremony of the deity in the month of *Poush Sukla Ashtami* (December-January). The deity is carried out from the sanctuary of the Jana Baha temple and kept in an open dais to the south-east side of the temple. The official caretakers called the *Dyo Pala* take off the 108 pieces of clothing one by one in public view before bathing the deity with the hot and cold water fetched from Vishnumati River along with milk, *ghee* (butter) and honey (F. Photography, 2015). This ceremony is presided over by Kathmandu Kumari, without whose presence the ritual would remain incomplete. It is only after the bathing ceremony the repainting of the deity is done by a Vajrcharya priest (unlike in the case of Rato Machhindranath where the repainting is done by professional painters) who is directed by a skilled artist what to do exactly since he is not allowed to touch the deity (Tuladhar, 2009, Shakya, 2012:57). The repainting is done in open so that anyone who is interested to watch it can do so without any restriction. The construction of the thirteen-storied chariot (around fifty feet tall) i.e. the moving temple is built by the Jyapu Newars of Thane and Kwane under the supervision of members of Maharjan caste. The construction is based on the symbolic structure of the universe: *Swarga*

[30] The meaning of the name *Seto Machhidranath* is *Seto* means white in Nepali owing to the white color of the deity, *Machhe* means far away land or fish, *indra* means the rain god and *nath* means the master of all.

(swarga), *Martya* (earth) and *Narka* (hell) (Tandukar, 2011). Firstly the statue of the deity is carried from Janabaha temple to Durbar Marg in a palanquin by around ten Vajrayacharya caretakers who have undergone purification rituals, accompanied by the traditional musicians, worshippers, spectators and so on. Right after the statue of the deity is placed on the chariot, the procession begins with the gunshots fired by the *Guru ko Paltan*. The chariot is pulled mainly by the male members of the community and there is no particular day reserved for women. Every day the chariot is pulled through the serpentine streets of Kathmandu and halted at a certain designated open spaces or cross roads called *chowk* which is again signaled by the fire shots. The worshippers and curious spectators throng to these spaces to either take part in the worship, or watch them, or just get carried away in the spirited atmosphere amidst loud cheers and drum beats. The second day of the *Jatra* also sees various performances taking place at the fringes and in the center as the chariot is pulled away by the pullers of the particular locality. On the final day the deity is brought to its final destination Lagan Tole where the festival culminates after chariot circumambulates a tree thrice and hence the festival is also called *Laganya* by many. It is on this day the Kathmandu Kumari is brought in her palanquin through a separate route to meet the deity. Although this day is not declared a public holiday, but the number of spectators is not discouraging as they turn up in huge numbers to not only worship Machhindranath but Kumari as well. Rashmila Shakya has mentioned that during her tenure as Royal Kathmandu Kumari it was the Seto Machhindranath that she came into contact the most frequently (2012:56). However, if we look from the spectator's point of view, it is only during the chariot festival like this that she comes in so close proximity with not only the deity but also with the people, where she herself is a spectator just like others.

2.4 *Indra Jatra/ Kumari Jatra* of Kathmandu

The *Indra Jatra* festival of Kathmandu is considered as the biggest street festival of Kathmandu. This festival is organized by *Guthi Sansthan* and government aids is celebrated to commemorate Lord Indra, the God of rain. Popularly known as the *Indra Jatra*, it is also remembered as *Ye Yan* festival by the Newar population before it was officially came to be known as it is now.[31] The

[31] *Ye* means an old name of Kathmandu, *Ya means* festival

festival commences on the 12th day of the bright fortnight *Bhadra* of the lunar Nepal Sambat calendar. Referring to this festival as 'Kathmandu Festival', Anil M Sakya (2000) has called this festival as "festival within a festival" as he goes on to divide it into four parts: upaku wanegu, Indra jatra, Kumari jatra and the public exhibition of the Bhairav masks and images of various gods in the city (p.324). Legend has it that Indra had once come to the valley in a human form along with his elephant Pulikishi to pluck Parijat flowers for his mother. The local people captured him unaware of his identity. When her son did not return home, she reached the valley as Dagini and started searching for him in the streets of Kathmandu. When the people realized their mistake, they freed him and Dagini, out of gratefulness, promised to provide shower for the rest of the year in the whole valley. This festival is basically a reenactment of the myth with many newer characters inserted later.

The *Jatra* starts off with the erection of *lingo*, a pole brought from the Nala forest after performing the rituals of choosing the perfect tree for the event. Alongside the pole is displayed the giant head mask of Shwet Bhairav for those eight days, from whose mouth the *chhang* (rice beer) is poured out continuously throughout the week and people consume this as *Prasad* (god's offering). As the *Indra Jatra* commences with a promising week ahead, it is celebrated with pomp and vigor by both the Hindus and Buddhists of Kathmandu. It is only during this festival out of the thirteen public appearances the Kathmandu Kumari makes three appearances on the third, fourth and the last day respectively which are locally called *Kumari Jatra*. It is said that the *Indra Jatra* festival was started by King Gunakamadeva in around 10th century and it was only in the 18th century during the reign of the last of the Malla kings Jaya Prakasha Malla, *Kumari Jatra* also began to be associated with the *Indra Jatra* (John Mellowship, 2007:119). Thus it is also a very significant moment for her devotees who get to see and take her blessings. She is pulled in a chariot along with two smaller chariots of Ganesh and Bhairav in the crowded streets of Kathmandu. Kumari's appearance is considered important because it is only through applying *tika*, she provides a symbolic approval to rule to the head of the state be it the reigning king during monarchy or the President and Prime Minister in the present time. Gerard Toffin (1992) has named this festival as the Royal festival because of its strong association with the king in the history of the festival (p.73). The final day of the festival as well as the Kumari's procession sees the head of the state and government dignitaries making a beeline to seek her blessing inside Kumari *Chen* and stand with folded hands as her chariot passes through the Basantapur Square.

I mainly focus on the final day of *Kumari Jatra* (Fig. 13) that starts from Basantapur Square and returns back to the same place at night. I will look into the performances that have contributed to make this festival a spectacular one. This festival offers a maximum number of occurrences that must have been added in the course of time that had more elements of spectacle rather than an essence of pure ritualistic practices. Although the question does arise if there are certain practices which can be categorized as what can be called pure ritual or has it always been the case of a balanced assimilation of spectacle and ritual? This question will be dealt with in the course of this chapter. In the first day of *Kumari Jatra*, traditional musicians reach the venue a couple of hours before the actual procession starts with their *dhime* and *bhusya*. First of all, they circumambulate the three chariots stationed outside the Kumari *Chen* while playing the instruments with a rhythmic fervor. They then walk towards the open space of the Square and form many circles while continuously in sync with each other. Recently many music schools also come in groups sporting their jerseys making themselves visible in the crowd. The inviting atmosphere of the Square grows thick with the high-toned intensified and immersive acoustics. As the sound grew louder and louder with the addition of more groups of musicians one could barely hear anything but a unified sound of drums, cymbals rhythm. Within a short period of time the crowd grew so big that the prospect of anything happening in the square seemed impossible as the space for performance had also been claimed by the spectators. Three masked dancers came dancing piercing through the spectators: Akash Bhairava (in blue mask) and his two attendants (Fig. 14) in red masks carrying long swords. It happened in a way that no disruption was felt even though the crowd was way bigger than the space could hold. They came towards the Kumari *Chen,* circumambulate the three chariots that were placed nearby and then again vanished into one of the circles of musicians synchronizing their footsteps accordingly. They were followed by various different characters like Pulukishi (Indra's elephant) (Fig. 15), Majipa Lakhey (a demon dancer) (Fig. 16), *Guru ko Paltan* playing music comprising of different instruments like drums, cymbal, trumpets etc. As each character made an appearance, the crowd moved to different directions forming a different pattern. When performances get over, Majipa Lakhey comes dancing towards the entry of Kumari's palace to ward off evil spirits, Ganesh and Bhairava emerge out of Kumari *Chen* and take their seats in their respective chariots, along with the Pancha Buddhas walking in a light-footed manner. The whole crowd and the flower adorned chariot waits patiently for Kumari. There she comes in all her regalia walking on the red cloth as her foot is not supposed to touch the ground claiming each

and every space of the Square with her presence. [32] As she sits in the chariot, the soundscape of the space reaches its zenith forming a crescendo which melts down as the crowd makes a unified loud cheering and people bow down to her with folded hands. Like other *Jatra* starts in the Valley, *Indra Jatra* also starts with a round of gunshots and the sky is filled up with grey pigeons flying right past the chariot and producing a theatrical effect. Kumari's chariot is pulled to a certain distant by the women while the smaller chariots of Ganesh and Bhairava are allowed to pass first. Finally, the three chariots are pulled forward towards the northern part of Kathmandu as the President performs the king's role and throws some coin on the chariots passing by.

2.5 Sacred Space: Performance of Contest or Consent

In her case study of the Amerindian pre-conquest performance, Diana Taylor (2004) provides an insight on how a city was a-

> site of sacred performance, a space in which everything was created, designed, and reenacted with a purpose. Nature was ritualized and ritual was naturalized in a choreographed balancing act (p.364).

I examine the process of incorporation of sacredness to a space. What makes a space a spectacularly sacred space? The transition from one identity to another consists of a particular change in the very characterization that upgrades a nominal space to a sacred one; enhancing the prospect of performative space. Besides, there is always a possibility of using a performative space in 'unintended ways'as Erica Fisher-Lichte (2008:108) asserts. There is a visible or invisible boundary that facilitates a certain status to a space, making it different from the other mundane spaces. That a space creates a certain meaning, or its function is of spiritual value that differentiates it from a regular space, making it more exposed to untoward intervention. A scared space does not necessarily mean a powerful space; it can be the most vulnerable of all the spaces because there is always a never-ending struggle of 'making and keeping' it sacred. Mircea Eliade (1987) asserts

[32] Kumari walks on a red cloth except for one occasion. Rashmila Shakya writes, "At other festivals I was carried, and this was the only time of the year that I got to walk any distance. It was on a white cloth, of course, since my foot could never touch the ground, but it was thoroughly enjoyable (Shakya, 2012:55)."

the character of sacred space through an experience of 'spatial nonhomogeneity', 'the only real and real-ly existing space', 'with a fixed point, a center' (p.20-21). Highlighting the situational aspect of sacred, Arnold van Gennep (1975) discusses the 'pivoting of the sacred' where the presence of the sacredness cannot be attributed to an 'absolute' and can vary emoting different meanings (p.12). David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal (1995) have also noted that the definition of sacred can be broadly categorized into two parts: substantial and situational: where the former stresses on the 'experiential qualities' that can be associated with the sacred, the latter talks more about the creation of the sacred through 'human labor of consecration' in producing that space dominated by two ways: appropriation through power and exclusion through purity (p.17). They argue:

> The most significant aspects of sacred space are not categories, such as heaven, earth and hell, but hierarchical power relations of domination and subordination, inclusion and exclusion, appropriation and dispossession. (p.17)

I take a departure here and argue that the concept of sacred space goes beyond the dualistic character of situational and substantial. It has rather taken an eclectic shape exhibiting its performative side with a vibrant political color.

As Ernest Renan calls nation is a daily plebiscite, so is this act of creating the sacredness of the space on a daily basis. The annual necessity of moving out from the interior of temple to the streets and public Squares as per strategy of sacred time frame opens many layers of social hierarchy and power dynamics deeply embedded in the social and political structures. I term it as performative strategy in the sense that these festivals never clashed with each other. And the weather prospect is also taken under consideration as the deities discussed in reference are rain gods after all. In order to build or establish the hierarchy of a certain section be it the society, the community or the state, one of the most important strategy would be to claim or create a space either through contestation or consent. I argue that the creation of the public space for public worship was not for a unified and egalitarian form of worship, but to draw the line between the state and the people through a refined hegemonic process; sacralisation of not only the space, but also the relationship between the state and the divinities.

Henri Lefebvre (2007) argues that the concept of space is no longer limited to a 'geometrical meaning' (p.1). It is very much part of social, material and political formation. He discusses about different kinds of spaces like physical, mental and social space; and writes:

> (Social) space is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather, it subsumes things produced, and encompasses their relationship in their coexistence and simultaneity- their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder (p.73).

In the procession-styled festivals taken for study, the streets have the maximum contribution in the analysis of space along with *chowk* and the public Squares. The streets of Kathmandu were constructed keeping in mind the festival routes with *chowk* and public Squares at regular intervals. It was not only built to ease the commutation on a daily basis, but to make the festival especially the procession-based ones a part and parcel of the commuters where religion and religious activities played a crucial part. Whether it was solely religious or not is a different question altogether given the fact that the three chariot festivals give greater visibility to the power-accessed section in a strong manner. Bijaya K Shrestha (2011) analyzes the street plan of Kathmandu starting from the Malla period till the present time. He explains during the Malla period the street network and its hierarchy was categorized according to the religious function which gave way to three kinds of streets: a) the festival procession route, b) streets linking various neighborhoods (for the general public), c) funeral routes connected to the major river banks to carry out dead bodies (p.110). The first two types create the Squares that function as the stopping points of the chariots during the festivals, which basically is formed through the widening and intersection of the streets at various intervals. The general public use the open spaces as playground, washing clothes, sunbathing and also to gather during earthquakes and so on. On the other hand, the same space could be used to display the image of gods, goddesses, religious dance, *bhajan-kirtan* (plays and songs) as well as the fixed places to begin, end and stop the chariot processions during various festivals (p.111). Hence the sacred space is created out of a regular street in such a manner that a passerby cannot but be a part of that space as it is not something one can avoid as the same route is generally used for non-religious activities as well. However, in the present scenario the procession route is also not without problems. In the recent time the other cities of the Valley along with Kathmandu like Patan and Bhaktapur have faced several problems due to its failing street

plans and mishandling of the increasing traffic hazards. In such an urban space the chariot processions seem to be creating another set of hiccups. Often chariot accidents or obstructions take place during the processions which is viewed as a bad omen, however, one cannot overlook the problems underneath and pass it off as religious sign. The question of a sacred space takes a crucial turn when the dialogic and dialectic relationship between the secular and religion comes to forefront. This asks us to think if the secular space is overtaken by the religious space or if there is still a possibility of an alternative space that does not make people a part of this 'sacredness' by default, but by choice.

The legitimate ownership of a space and the act of sacralising it through appropriation, inclusion or exclusion not only gives visibility but also political leverage and social control in the hands of few. A public worship can be a seen as a public demonstration of power; be it the power of being the torchbearers of a rich cultural heritage or the power of being the forerunner of the political system of the state. It is not surprising to see the political community of Nepal not missing out any opportunity to be seen in these festivals. They do not take part in the procession but only during the inauguration or conclusion of the events. A moving space can be performative, no doubt, but a fixed space gives more control and the sense of territorialisation is dense; no matter whether they take part in the procession or not but they are always considered the first worshipper of the deities making their position more pronounced. Lucyna Przybylska (2014) in a study of the Baltic city of Gdynia, talks about how the process of sacralisation took place before and after the World War II, and mentions three kinds of sacralisation: architectural (through constructions of religious architecture), nominal (naming of streets, school, sites etc.) and temporal (religion related rituals in public space). In addition, Przybylska also cites two circumstances for the formation of religious landscape: "the need to express faith and the opportunity to do it (p.117)." The second circumstance is totally political and if we look at it from Nepal's point of view, what we see is the reason behind the public worship and the chariot procession itself is political in nature and is a major political act. It involves as a deep strategy to rule and to be ruled through consent, through appropriation and a gradual process of exclusion.

In context of Nepal, Hinduism and Buddhism cannot be viewed in isolation. Both have lost their independent characteristics. A paradigmatic shift in the structure of Hinduism and Buddhism is an interesting point to take forward the idea of political act. David Gellner (2005) tries to look

at the emergence of conversion amongst the Hindus and Buddhists in the medieval and modern Nepal. However, he does not find a single case of conversion, because what would count as conversion would be for a Hindu to become a Buddhist monk and this did not happen at all (Gellner, 2005:766). Instead what happened was a compromise in terms of religious structure in order to be accepted in the larger domain. In other words, conversion was not accepted but 'drifting' to Hinduism was allowed (p.769). He refers to two different forms of religion Brahmanism and Buddhism and prefers to call Brahmanism as the term 'Hindu' was not available before the fifteenth century and 'Hinduism' in English came to be used after early nineteenth century (Gellner, 2005:759).[33] Discussing about Brahmanism Gellner says Brahmanism was:

> a worldy, ritualistic, and at times mystical religion, which required the sacrifice of animals..based on orally transmitted texts in an archaic Vedic Sanskrit that few understood. It was exclusivist in that only Brahmans or selected high-status others could practice it (p.759).

On the other hand, Buddhism was

> one of a number of renouncer religions that rejected all this. Buddhism was-relatively, and certainly when contrasted with Brahmanism-otherwordly, antiritualist, rationalist, egalitarian, and opposed to sacrifice (Ibid.).

However, two thousand years later both the religion changed so much so that Brahmanism became what Buddhism was and vice versa. Brahmanism began to be seen as the renouncer religion as a "marga or 'way', but in this case as the way of Shiva" on the other hand, Buddhism had become "highly ritualistic, possessed a caste hereditary priests very similar to Brahmans, and now had its own scriptures (the Mahayana Sutras and the Tantras) in the Brahmans' holy language, Sanskrit" (Ibid. 759-60). Not a case of conversion for sure, but it does raise a pertinent question of the politics of inclusion and exclusion. Both the religions were trying to fit in to the given space and this attempt is clearly visible in the complete change of structures and it does point out massive influence of Hinduism that arrived in the Kathmandu valley much after Buddhism which was

[33] Wendy Doniger also mentions 'Hinduism' as a 'European construction' calling it the 'armadillo, part hedgehog, part tortoise' (Doniger, 2013:3).

already present from fifth century B.C.E. (Ibid. 759) There was a constant attempt to hijack the space which was allotted to the worship of Buddhist deities.

Michael Allen highlights a very important aspect of Newar life where he mentions that Newars spend a great deal of their time, energy and resources in religious activities like "making offerings at temples and shrines, performing sacrifices and other elaborate rituals, attending numerous and popular festivals and fairs, and participating in processions and pilgrimages" (Allen, 2000:282). It is a Newari identity that is unique in the whole of Nepal because none of the other communities have such a big network in terms of religious activities as they do, of which the chariot processions are considered to be the most privileged ones. However, this uniqueness could not remain with the community for long as it became the most sought after possession for the Hindu kings as well. The *Bunga Dyah Jatra* which was already in existence even before tenth century was rechristened as *Rato Machhindranath Jatra* from seventeenth century onwards to make it more of an inclusive festival, in other words Hindu festival. The kings of Lalitpur Siddhi Narasingh (reigned 1619-1660) and his son Sri Nivas (reigned 1660-1684) attempted to appropriate the deity under their own Shaivite and Shakta practices through various means which included identification of the Bungadyah with the Shaivite Machhindranath and declaring the deity as the protector of the city and construction of another temple so that the deity could reside there for six months and half of the year in his original home at Bungamati (Gellner, 2005:763-4). *Indra Jatra* is a good example to showcase the mobilization of space from the Newari elements to a more of brahminical intentions fully supported by the Shah rule from the later part of the 18th century. Not only did the Shah dynasty replace the Malla dynasty, they also attempted to erase the presence of Malla history from the festival itself by inserting supportive narratives and change of rituals in a gradual manner. There are interestingly two narratives one related to Jaya Prakasha Malla and the other Prithvinarayan Shah about how the third public appearance of Kumari day was added on to the eighth day. The popular one is that Jaya Prakasha Malla's concubine used to live on the northern side of the city. Due to some reason she could not see Kumari on her previous chariot procession. And as a result she requested the King to add one more procession on the last day of the festival (Mellowship, 2007:138, Shakya, 2012:52). The other narrative tells that when Prithvinarayan Shah invaded the Kathmandu Valley during the *Indra Jatra*, he was unfortunately imprisoned by the local Newars and so could not receive Kumari's *tika* on his forehead which was a symbol of Kumari's approval to rule the Valley. So once he convinced the local people he added

one more day so that he could receive the *tika* and become the King of the Valley (Mellowship, 2007:138). Apart from the narratives, even the Malla rituals during the festivals were encountered during the Shah rule. For instance, a white horse of Malla dynasty's tutelary deity Taleju used to attend the beginning of the festival. However, when Shah Dynasty came to power, then the white horse was projected as Shah King's horse (Toffin, 1992:77). In case of *Indra Jatra* festival also the same strategy was applied where *Ye Yan* festival of *Newar* community got transformed to *Indra Jatra* after the Shah invasion in 1768 by Gorkha King Prithvinarayan Shah. As John Mellowhip writes, "Converting Ye Yan to a composite Parbatia/ Newar festival for the whole of Nepal meant sanskritizing many aspects of Ye Yan ritual" (p.119), Nepalese society and the cultural affiliation went through a massive transformation post 1768. Besides the unification of Nepal, the other striking development was the assimilation of Newar festivals under Hinduism that served as the only legitimate door to the sacred space. It created a safe room to bring the reigning king to justify his presence and participation in that sacred space; making the Newari term a colloquial term limited to the community's usage only. Although the Newar community continued the chariot festivals resisting any sort of internal changes in terms of ritualistic practices, but the exterior appearance became more and more Hinduised with the pressure of the Kings to interpenetrate their own identity into the sacred sphere. The initial spatial encroachment thus came through the dialogic process of name-changing; contested through a non-violent performance.

2.6 *Jasko Sakti, Usko Bhakti* (Whose power, his devotion): The Politics of Being Visible

Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) in his work on 15th century French Renaissance writer Rabelais discovers that the carnival space is a homogenous space shading off all the barriers of 'caste, property, profession and age' (p.10). Referring to the official feast as a 'consecration of inequality', carnival projects a contrast picture of an egalitarian approach (Ibid.). The carnivalesque traits became a part and parcel of not only the social life but also religious and political life where it was completely 'independent of Church and State but tolerated by them' (Ibid.). Thus, the carrnivalesque flavor penetrated into every aspect of society making its presence felt, thereby forming a homogenous identity through the suspension of hierarchy, purely as a feast of 'becoming, change and renewal'

(Ibid.). In the context of public worship and the processions taken under study, my approach towards this theory of Bakhtin provides a critique to this carnival model where the festival space is not necessarily subverting the power but reinforcing and somewhere contributing to the authority. In the case of *Rato Machhindranath Jatra*, *Seto Machhindranath Jatra* and *Indra Jatra*/ *Kumari Jatra*, the strong sense of hierarchy comes out in open: one community fighting for its hijacked identity, one religion using its appropriation skills, and above all, the ruling section solidifying its hold over the population through the manufacturing of the lineage of gods and goddesses.

The emergence of 'being visible' is not a new phenomenon and not even restricted to one region or culture. It is a universal human tendency because the sense of identity, empowerment and voice is deeply rooted to it. Daniella Berti (2009) discusses the 'privileged framework' where politics combines with ritual and religious activities in the Kullu Dussehra, a week long annual festival in the Kullu district of Himachal Pradesh where the king (also a local BJP MP) gains political visibility in the event of god Raghuraj's meeting with the local deities (p.107). She argues, "With the end of the kingdoms, these ritual contexts, far from being abandoned, have been integrated and reinterpreted by the new democratic state" (Ibid.). Not only that, even the royal patronage was deliberated on the local deities in order to gain visibility and hence legitimacy into the local ritual sphere (Berti, 2011:126). The ramification of being invisible can go to the extent of being lost and forgotten. The visibility that a public worship receives is far greater than a private form of worship. It not only brings to surface the invisible part of worship, but it also demonstrates the real location of the power and who has the power to exercise power. Chantal Saint-Blancat and Adriano Cancellieri (2014) write about an annual Filipino religious ritual in the form of a procession in the streets of Padua, Italy. Filipinos are a minority group in Padua and this procession transforms the streets into a sacred space for the duration of that event. What the authors try to stress here is that a public religious ritual is not only a process of a community of one faith coming together as one identity, but it is a "clear quest for public visibility to 'take place' and 'make place'" (p.646). In this identanarian quest we should not take it for granted that each and every individual is in the same plain and hence the same visibility will be achieved uniformly. There is an unstated hierarchy starting from the lowest to the highest strata and this becomes prominent in the public form of worship; hierarchy in a social, religious and political sphere. Firstly, the caste-based work attributed to the people of the Newar community during the festivals, where the most laborious

works are given to the lower or untouchable caste whereas the higher or the priestly caste engage in attending the deities or the supervisory works which highlights another form of hierarchy at a social level. One important point to discuss here is how the formation of various groups in the 2000-year-old *Newar* community is influenced by the Hindu caste system to a great extent. Michael Allen observes:

> Newar society is today, and has been for at least seven hundred years, organized on a classic Hindu caste basis. By this I mean that the total community is divided into a large number of hereditary groups, each of which is endogamous, associated with one of more traditional occupations, and the members of which relate to the members of other like groups by reference to notions of relative purity (Allen, 2000:166).

Caste is penetrated into the idea of community which gives rise to categorization of duties in the social sphere. The relation between visibility and caste identity is the amount of visibility differed according to the caste. It was not just the duties that are divided, but also the probability of being visible; the visibility in the periphery and the centre. *Rato Machhindranath Jatra*, *Seto Machhindranth Jatra* and the *Indra Jatra* are suitable examples where various roles and duties are assigned to the members of the community according to their caste. For instance, Kumari belongs to the Shakya or Vajrachraya caste, the Buddhist priests belong to the Vajracharya and Shakya caste, Majipa Lakhey belongs to the Ranjitkar caste, the sweepers of the road belong to Dyahla caste, the traditional musicians to the Khadgi caste, the people pulling the chariot mainly belong to the Jyapu caste, the Manandhar caste pulling the poles, and so on and so forth. The division of labor is made in such a way that the priestly caste like Vajracharya and Shakya perform the less-laborious roles whereas cloth dyeing caste like Ranjitkar have to wear masks and costumes as heavy as 15 kg. Ram Ranjitkar, a Majipa Lakhey performer says that Lakhey's job is to lead the Kumari's path and has to run for hours bare footed, dancing in sync with the drum beats (The Nation, 2014). However, also it has to be noted here that the concept of labor cannot be the only yardstick to measure the practice of caste within the socio-politico-religio-cultural sphere.

Secondly, the hierarchy of Brahmin priests replacing or taking part in the public worship along with the Newar priest on the same platform, identifying the king with Hindu god and appropriating them in the religious rituals is another form of hierarchy in terms of religious level.

We see a gradual movement or an attempt to replicate the royal Hindu structure of the Mallas and the Shahs by Newar community either to show their loyalty or to be included within the royal sphere. Although the Brahmans were given the highest status in Licchavi period also, however, from the Malla rule onwards, they were not only reserved for the king and those closest to him, even the high-ranking Newari Shresthas of Lalitpur (Patan) started to include them as their principle domestic priests while the Buddhist priests were kept for tantric rituals (*diksa-guru*) only (Gellner, 2005:766). Post Shah Invasion, the Shresthas of Kathmandu adopted the same strategy to associate themselves with dominant Parbatiya, the loyals of the Shah rulers (Ibid. 767). As a result, the Brahman priests gradually outnumbered the Buddhist priests in the ritual space as the former had the king's favor, although the latter were not totally wiped out from the ritual life of the valley. However, their importance did wane to a considerable degree as the Brahman presence was imposed on the festival rituals as an inevitable part of the worship be it public or private. This increasing participation in the 'negotiated or reinvented'[34] ritual space, started from Shrestha households and ended with the festivals that were not even Hindu festivals to begin with. In the present context, even the *Guthi* official who is supposed to be a Newar belongs to a Nepalese Brahmin caste and performs the task of displaying the *Bhoto* display during the *Jatra*, whereas the Newari attendants of the deity take care of him throughout the year.

There is also an attempt to draw a parallel between *Indra* and the King. This asks us to think if it was invented to empower the King to create a certain aura amongst his subjects and also legitimate his position as par with the God. Toffin gives an example of the festival during the reign of Pratapa Malla when the location of the festival had to be shifted due to his inability to be present in Kathmandu (Toffin, 1992:87). His presence is important just like *Indra's* presence and also it is only the King who is eligible to observe the festival in true sense of the term. Even the post-Malla rule, the Shah Kings were considered as the incarnation of Vishnu and during the festival the *das avatars* (ten incarnations) of Vishnu is being played out in front of the former royal palace, Hanuman Dhoka. B V Hoek (1990) mentions that the honorific of the king is *Sri Panch* i.e. five times lustre and that of the Brahmin is six times lustre *Sri Cha.* He writes:

[34] The definition of sacredness keeps altering and there is always a need for negotiating and redefine it (Kiong and Kong, 2010:31).

> The divinity of the Brahmin, of course, has always been beyond question in Indian tradition. It is the divinity of the king which is puzzling with its apparent ambivalence and transience (p.152).

This identification with gods is not an uncommon phenomenon and in case of Nepal, its projection is not merely restricted to a metaphorical and metaphysical level, but conflated with the political understanding of the rulers' eligibility to become a god-ruler.

Thirdly, in earlier times, the king realized the necessity to make the worship public, where as in recent times the government heads realized the necessity to replace the king in public. This is one kind of hierarchy that happened at a political level. Michael Wilmore (2008) at a case study on the street protest that were a regular sight during the autocratic reign of Rana regime in1950s, during the Panchayat regime in 1990s and *Jana Andolan* (People's Movement) that led to the overthrow of Gyanendra's brief dictatorship in 2006. He then tries to link the street protest with the street procession of religious rituals which has been adopted not only for social and religious purpose, but also for public awareness programs in Tansen a small town situated in the Western district of Palpa, Nepal. In the recent times the processional rite has been used for 'secular and alternative religious identities' like King Birendra's Silver Jubilee, International Red Cross Day, Amnesty International and even Easter and Eid celebrations (p.44). Wilmore discusses how Ujir Singh Thapa (referred through a local historian Karna Baniya), the post-annexation governor of Nepal 'deliberately modelled Bhagwati Jatra on the Indra Jatra of Kathmandu'. Wilmore writes:

> Such processions manifest the power of the state within these locations through the association of sacred and temporal authority. As the chariot carrying the deity makes its way around the bazaar it stops at certain key points of political authority (the district and the municipality headquarters) and religious power (most of the town's main temples) (p.45).

This strategy is not just unique in Tansen, as already mentioned it travelled from Kathmandu where the public exhibition of power was a social necessity through the religious propaganda. The collective consent performs on the basis of political reach amongst the masses; through performing the presence of power. Dr. Ram Baran Yadav not only became the first President of democratic Nepal in 2008, he was also the first President to attend *Bhoto Jatra* as a symbolic gesture of

replacing the King amidst army fanfare and other office bearers like Vice President Parmanand Jha and the acting Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala. In a news report, it is sarcastically mentioned that Jha who had faced enormous criticism of using Hindi in his swearing-in ceremony did try his best to gain favor by donning the Nepalese traditional outfit called *Daura Suruwal* and *Dhaka Topi* (News Mercantile, 2008). Yadav was also present on the last day of *Indra Jatra* to seek Kumari's blessing in 2009 along with Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal. According to news report, it is mentioned that the Maoist supporters did not leave this opportunity to show black flags to them as a sign of protest (News Mercantile, 2009). It is not clear whether their protest was against the promotion of royal institutional events or the policies CPN-UML (Communist Party of Nepal- Unified Marxist-Leninist)-led government. It would be an irony if it is the former reason given the fact that even the party the protestors were affiliated to did not leave any stone unturned to be visible in events like this when Maoist government came to power in 2008. The reasons can be both because even a section of the party can have their own differences and it is their fundamental right to express it through protest demonstrations. But what is striking me is time and again it gets proved that the space has never been a religious or social space alone, because politics is not an intangible part but an integral part of social reality. Thus, the necessity is not only always for the oppressed to be heard and seen, but even the powerful identities have to be out there in open to be seen, heard and venerated irrespective of their political and divine status; the power to the powerful comes from the spectators.

2.7 The Tradition of Inventing the Tradition

On 15 May, 2015 a news report confirms the recovery of the *Bhoto* that had gone missing in the earthquake of 25 April, 2015 (The Kathmandu Post, May 2015). It was found under the rubble of the Bungamati temple on the 24th day after it had gone missing. The annual chariot procession which had commenced on 22 April had to be put on hold following the earthquake. 2015 being the twelfth year, it had started with a lot of enthusiasm and hence the *Bhoto* was definitely a prized possession of the temple authorities. It was recovered by a joint search team of Nepal Army and

other security forces and safely handed over to the *Guthi* official in the presence of Culture Minister Deepak Amatya.

Thinking of *Rato Machhidranath Jatra* without the *Bhoto Jatra* would definitely have dampened the spirits of the spectators if not the devotees. It is one of the biggest crowd pullers in Patan that people like to come out to watch it even though they can watch it in the television. The two-month long *Jatra* may not have a jubilant end had it not been the *Bhoto Jatra* to look forward to. I tried to think of *Rato Machhindranath Jatra* in its old form before the traditional ceremonial display of the *Bhoto* was not invented. Without the *Bhoto Jatra*, the festival might have looked somehow like this: the organizers might have to conclude a day earlier than now, there might not be a declared public holiday, the Patan Kumari might not have come for the event at all and the *Guthi* official might not have to encircle the chariot thrice to display the *Bhoto* to the spectators meaning he might not have anything important to contribute to the festival, there might not have been so much of military presence as the king and later the government officials might skip the last day or *Rato Machhindranath Jatra* might have got associated with another myth giving rise to another form of spectacle.

One important thing that has to be observed is that *Bhoto Jatra* does not have a Newari term because *bhoto* is a Nepali word meaning vest. If we look at all the three festivals, we find equivalent Newari terms which is not seen in the case of *Bhoto Jatra*. This signifies that it was not a Newari invention although the farmer in the myth belongs to Newar Jyapu caste. It is an invented tradition that got clubbed with the main *Rato Machhindranath Jatra* in the course of time facilitated with *bhoto* myth. There is no such record of when this event got associated, however the association cannot be a recent one. On addition to that, Kumari's appearance is also another event that happens simultaneously on the same day whereas there is no myth that explains her presence. As a matter fact, her participation is seen as a mere spectator who also comes to see the *bhoto* like any other spectator and nor does she claim ownership to the *bhoto* as it gets displayed. The only role that this 'performing the display' is to create a performative space, to continue the tradition of invention and to display the power elements of the king then and now the State. This invention of tradition puts forward the question of spectacle though which the domination is exercised by commanding respect and subordination from all quarters not only as a religious responsibility, but also as an unquestionable veneration to the politically potent.

Indra Jatra exhibits end number of performances that starts from the Basantapur Square and spreads out towards the streets of Kathmandu. Each and every performance in the festival is accompanied by individual narratives and sometimes merged with other narratives justifying their appearance. One such interesting narrative is the interlinking of Bhairava and Kumari to the Indra narrative. It can be seen as a good example that allows one to see the inclusion of these deities to the festival and create a spectacle out of their performance. There is a corollary to the Indra myth that when Dagini came down to earth in search of Indra, she was accompanied by Bhairava. Being left behind, Bhairava was challenged by a demon that emerged victorious. In that hour of crisis, Bhairava called for help and it was Kumari who came and slaughtered the demon with her prowess. It is from that day onwards Bhairava never comes out of his abode without the attendants who guard him all the time (Toffin, 1992:78). It is a gradual process of various narratives intermixing to validate a festival where people from both the religion can be equal partakers. Thus *Indra Jatra* becomes a site of re-enactment of narratives that have the ability to survive on their own and yet they come up together in the form of an eight days long festival with an aim to exhibit its power to entrance the public/spectator. The association of *Kumari Jatra* with the *Indra Jatra* also meant a bigger support from both the Hindus and the Buddhists, the majority communities in the valley. *Indra Jatra* becomes crucial to understand the history because of the multiplicity of narratives unlayering different times and rules. The importance of an event depends a lot on the content and the significance it holds among the public/ spectator. *Indra Jatra*, on its own, would not have been this big an event if the *Kumari Jatra* had not been associated with it. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Jaya Prakasha Malla built the Kumari *Chen* and a *rath* (chariot) in 1757, but he also invented a procession called *Kumari Jatra* and associated it with *Indra Jatra* in 1760 and officiated it through which history would remember him. The political situation of that time was not in favor of the king. On one hand, he lived under a constant fear of being replaced by his brothers, and on the other hand there was another danger of being annexed by the army of Pritvinarayan Shah's army who had been trying to invade the valley since a long time. He was very much aware of the religious sentiments of people and so he provided the channel through which they could exercise their beliefs. It became an indispensable part of *Indra Jatra* festival in such a way that *Kumari Jatra* became the center of attraction in the name of *Indra Jatra*. The *Kumari Jatra* played a very crucial role in order to establish his territory and gain favor in the eyes of his subjects. It was his

way of claiming that space where he could perform the role of both a devotee and the king of the valley.

The parade of the *Guru ko Paltan* band is a clear example of addition post-1768 invasion. Not only that, the giant head mask of Swet Bhairava was a later addition during the rule of Rana Bahadur Shah in 1795 (Toffin, 1992:74). Gerard Toffin writes, "In doing so, they were searching to legitimate their power in the eyes of the Newar local population and reinforce the various sacra attached to their throne" (Ibid. 74-75). This indicates the fear of opposition from the public. The ruling sides tried to maintain the interest of the public by letting the ritual practices in the same order however, they also tried to fit in many performances wherever they could, giving it a performative color and meaning. Referring to the British monarchy, David Cannadine (2012) writes how meaning is altered not by the rituals and ceremonies but by the way it is performed. It is a gradual meaning-making process which is always on the move. He writes, "And so depending both on the nature of the performance and the context within which it is set, the 'meaning' of what is ostensibly the same ceremony might fundamentally alter (p.106). The fluid nature of this process makes the confluence of the narratives possible and hence produce the desired effect on the participants of the festival: performers and spectators alike.

Phillip B. Zarrilli (1992:91) argues how performance traditions change with time through the interplay of individual and social forces. His work on *kathakali*, the dance-drama of Kerala, discusses the role of patron in shaping the performance tradition and how it has changed through the intervention of patronage and the necessity to create spectacle to reach to the wider audience (Ibid. 115). The involvement of patrons did not remain restricted to financial support only. They authored the text, took part in it, shortened the length of the text and even inserted comical characters to create spectacle and acceptance amongst the least knowledgeable audience. Terming it a new performance art, Zarrilli argues, "The traditional royal and ritual elite were primary creators and innovators in the formation and eventual crystallization of the *kathakali* performance tradition" (p.115). The formative years of this performance tradition inculcated various characteristics from culturally available sources like *kutiyattam* as well. As a result, *kathakali* got its present shape through systematic innovation and interpolation. I look at it as an amalgam of patron influence, spectacle and thereby the necessity to penetrate into a larger spectatorship through additions and erasure of various elements. In case of *Jatra*s also, there have been additions

no doubt, but on the other hand, many older forms did fade away slowly and steadily to make room for the newer elements which promised spectacular sequences. A video taken by Arnold Adriaan Bake and produced by the British Library-Sound and Moving Image Collections in 1931 is a witness to the presence of traditional musicians enaged in a musical duet creating music not just out of their small bowl-like instrument called *khaijadi* (tambourine family), but using their feet to make thumping sound. The irony as well as the beauty of the video is that Bake was documenting the music tradition during the festival whereas it is a silent video. But there is not a single moment of disappointment in watching that sequence because the body creates the music and it does not seem inadeqaute in any sense. This document is also important in the sense that many temples and buildings and may be many of the performers and general public must have vanished after the terrible earthquake of 1934. However, if we look at the recent celebration of the same festival, this musical duets is not present anywhere, not in the center or the fringe. It has been absolved completely and have been replaced by drums and cymbals who perform in groups taking the center stage. Another addition that has been welcomed by the women folk is the presence of women in the chariot pulling making the festival more inclusive than it was before. Toffin also mentions about how in *lingo* (pole) raising ceremony only the Manandhar caste was entitled to perform. However, during his field work in 1992 he noticed that the custom was replaced by the Nepal army (Toffin, 1992:76). This led to a Newar campaign in 1998 where they protested against this step and demanded for the revival of the tradition and removal of the army (Sakya, 2000:326). As a result, it was decided by the government that only one senior person from the Manandhar caste would be allowed to supervise the event. There was also a tradition of playing *shanai* (oboe) by a musician belonging to Kusle caste (untouchable) beside the *lingo* everyday during the festival (Toffin, 1992:84). This tradition has also vanished away as more and more spectators gather in the Square rather than visit the site where the *lingo* gets erected and also it is not a hidden fact that more and more numbers of tradtional musicians are leaving their caste-based professions and shading off their embodied traditions in search of a better future.

Baz Kershaw (2003) tries to look beyond the visual aspect of spectacle and rather focuses on the control that it exercises to change the course of history. He writes:

> But besides picking out some of the tricky constants of spectacle, it is important to understand how it may have changed in history, particularly in its mediation of the powers that shape the human subject (p.594).

In my study of the all the three festivals, the *Seto Machhindranath Jatra* has the minimum number of days attributed to it. And also it is the most underrated of the three festivals in terms of political presence. On the other hand the Newar presence is stronger than in the other two. The first thing that strikes me in this festival is the characteristic long *dhwajas* (different colored ribbons) that are tied from the top of the chariot to the front where the deity's mask is placed (Hamrokathmandu, 2013). *Dhwaja* is an unmistakably Buddhist feature and has no resonance with the brahmanical culture. In another documentary of Bake where he documents the music during Seto Machhindranath festival of 1955-56, it is mentioned that the chariot is several stories high and the buildings should not be taller than the chariot as it might displease the God (The British Library, 2013). In the present time the buildings are so high that the spectators even clung to their windows and get a better view than in the streets. Coming back to the festival space it is a sight to see when two of the Newar attendants (there is not much room for more than two people) climb to the top of the chariot with brilliant swiftness amidst loud cheer from the spectators and throw the end of the ribbon towards the other attendants below, who in turn catch it and tie it to the front of the chariot. This keeps happening at certain intervals especially when the chariot reaches at specific *chowk*. About the ribbons that are placed in the chariot have also grown in numbers over the year. Its brightness does beautify the chariot and have become more elaborate, but it also gives out a strong intention of identity marker. As the balance act is being performed at the top, another act that charms the spectators on the ground is a number of male performers standing at certain distance with sticks in their hand and creating various balancing formations. The stick has a very Newari look complete with colored flags, yak's fur and metals attached to it. They perform inside the circles made by the group of drummers, thereby marking their presence even within the roaring crowd. There is nothing in particular that differentiates them from the crowd unlike the *Guru ko Paltan* who on the other hand perform in the uniform and the interaction with the spectators is minimum, almost none. They are very much part of the crowd sporting a pair of casual jeans, t-shirt and a rugged cap. In fact, they do mix with the crowd in between and appear suddenly to exhibit their *kalaa* (talent), before becoming one of the spectators again.

If I place *Seto Machhindranath Jatra* with the other two festivasl discussed, it becomes crucial to see that this particular *Jatra* it has been trying hard to retain the essense of the festival within the community and thus in the recent years the community has invented ways to do it. Lily Kong notes that the meaning can alter depending on the space concerned because a religious object in a temple, church or synagogue can be invested with different meanings if they are kept in a museum (Kong, 2001:218). It is the temporariness of meanings and counter-meanings that a public space has to be claimed, reclaimed, and appropriated time and again. The bathing ceremony is an apt example where the Brahmin presence is not at all visible and the rituals are completely done by the assigned Vajracharya attendants who do not even touch others or let others touch them or the deity. It is a well-maintained territory and may be because of this approach it would not be wrong to say that the festival is still in the hands of the Newar and they very well know the importance of reasserting this homogenous identity through the rituals. The chariot festival of 1978 shows a very different and diversified picture that does not match with the contemporary scenario. However, one thing that is still the same is the custom of choosing the chariot navigator from the community itself who directs the pullers with exceptionally strong sense of eloquent command and animated gestures, without losing an iota of patience or concentration amidst the loud and sometimes chaotic gathering of spectators. The *dhwajas* are very less in number, the route is more or less the same, and there are no performers with balancing sticks. However, the document features a parallel procession of masked dancers, women in Nepalese traditional outfit, performers in mythological costumes, traditional musicians and *Guru ko Paltan* parading along with the Royal army. This is in clear contrast to the present face of the festival which has seen a large decline in the performances limited to the customary music and a small procession of kids in Newari traditional wear, with the boys playing the *madal* (a sort of drum) and walk down the street (mynewsnepal, 2013). This document throws light on a very important side of the festival: a continuous resistance to external appropriation and internalization of what is Newari. There is a hesitance to open to acculturation that might prove lethal to the identity of the community, an attempt to remain inside the community cocoon. The festival seems to perform a politics of exclusion which might explain a lot about the political absence and more of religious and community presence. Another crucial point to observe here is the maximum association this particular deity has with Kumari as compared to the other two deities (Shakya, 2012:56). The presence of Kumari is required starting from the bathing ceremony to the conclusion of the festival.

However, this tradition can also be questioned if we consider that Kumari *Chen* itself was built in 1757. So prior to this she may not have taken part in the rituals and so the possibility of an invention cannot be dismissed altogether. The inclusion of Kumari within the frame of the festival also implies that she is an integral part of the community; in fact, an identity her community can identify with. The Kumari is not an outsider but a contact to the outside world; a political world. In the course of exclusion and resistance to further appropriation by the Brahminic influence, Kumari might be that edge beyond which the fear of domination resides.

The performer-spectator relationship is not relegated to the well-defined role and is always on the verge of breakdown. The performer can become a spectator and vice versa; the content matters rather than the role. In public worship and festivals, the roles are interchangeable; the spectator can be an active participant and take part in the worship and perform out of religiosity or perform in the street just for the sake of entertainment. On the other hand, the performer is also allowed to slip in the role of a spectator when and where required. There is always an equal presence of performers and audience be it the in the form of deities, human or non-human like the chariots without which the arena of the festival space would have been inconceivable. It is also evident that the presence of Kumari is manifested to define these festivals. Not only that, the appearance of Kumari also assures a dialogic relationship between the cultural, religious and political spectatorship. It is not only the ritual efficacy, but also a political efficacy that are at work to create a performative space where the religion and politics meet, where the past and present merge and staged together. To borrow from Taylor, it would be ideal to state that all the three festivals have designated 'to enact socially agreed-upon roles' (Taylor, 2004:365) to Kumari; be it of an active spectator and a social actor during *Bhoto Jatra*, or *Seto Machhindranath Jatra* and the focal point during *Indra Jatra.* Kumari becomes the metaphor of the missing link between the people and the State; her divine presence promulgates the political presence in the public. The religious duty of Kumari transcends the religious sphere or is compelled to do so in order to play a politically-motivated role in such a smooth sailing manner that the transition itself goes unnoticed. This observation takes the thought on invention of tradition a step forward and look at it the other way round. Thus, the tradition of inventing the tradition is achieved through spectacle that constitutes of what Kershaw likes to call 'performative society of today' (Kershaw, 2003:593).

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter brings the three important points of discussion to form an argument of how power is an outcome of a process: space, visibility and spectacle. It is not only achieved by claiming a space and defining the sacredness of that space, but also by asserting and sacrilizing elements. As discussed, the sacredness alters and there is always a need to assert, reassert ad sacralize those elements which makes the space what it is. It is where the seed of power is generated and is not in its full-fledged form. The second stage of this process is the display of power by 'making itself visible' and thereby perform hierarchy. It becomes important to remain in the memory of the spectators; to be acknowledged as the power presence. This is when the power outlines a certain shape within the sacredness of the space. The third stage is the creation of domination through spectacle, through spectaclization, and through the tradition of invention. I am not asserting that this is the ultimate stage to achieving power, but it is one of the most fruitful strategy of performing power. Had it not been this, the festivals discussed in the chapter would not have been able to see the light of the day and the cult of Kumari would have becomes oblivious, just like many of those village and small town Kumaris who linger in the memories and not in the dimly-lit narrow streets. The question arises who sustains whom; the festivals sustain the Kumaris or vice versa or both sustain the State.

Chapter III

Gendering Performance: Kumari and her Performativity

3.1 Introduction

Her eyes flashed up as she watched me enter. She was no more than six years old. Her hair was combed tightly into a bun and tied with a ribbon on top of her head. Thick lines of colyrium exaggerated her eyes and elongated them to her temples. A clot of reddened rice from the morning's puja clung to the centre of her forehead. Hanging around her neck over a scarlet jersey, was a silver amulet box-the yantra mala of Taleju. Her bare feet protruding beneath a scarlet skirt of satin brocade, rested expectantly in an offering tray. She was clutching the sides of her throne like the commander of a starship; her expression, despite the freshness of her face and the adorable plumpness of her cheeks, deadly serious. I found myself smiling impulsively at her as I entered the room but-just like the Kumari in Kathmandu- the gorgeous eyes, recalling me to respectfulness, returned an uncompromising glare (Tree, 2014:142).

This above narrative is taken from Isabella Tree's first encounter with the Patan Kumari. The narrative vividly sketches the identity that is known to the world as Kumari and her awareness of being a Kumari. This chapter is an act of studying Kumari of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur, some of the most venerated personifications of Kumari in Kathmandu Valley. This chapter attempts to explore the performative aspect of Kumari in context of her gender roles through two modes of 'social' and 'performance'. The chapter will discuss gendered roles of Kumari be it performing a social role or on stage, through performing perfection, performing puberty, and performing Kumari in *Devi Pyakha* dance form by the young boys from the *Shrestha* caste of the Newar community. It particularly explores the idea of performing perfection and what it takes to perform a role flawlessly that Kumari's social identity demands of her to perform. It will further discuss the notion of puberty as a gendered performance, the gendering of role in different phases of pre and post Kumari. Rather than looking at the much discussed secrecy of the initiation rites, this chapter intends to look at the performing Kumari through the lens of performance in contexts of practice, rehearsal, audition, mimesis and perfection. It focuses on the fluidity of performance

and hence it is not the 'performed' but always remains in the state of 'performing'. I argue that the powerful identity of Kumari does not reside on her body per se, but the identity is a product of a gendered construct, within which the façade of her power remains embodied. This chapter complicates Kumari's identity and analyses whether Kumari's identity can be categorized within the gender structure, or is there any possibility of evading that structure and look beyond the manufactured idea of sex and gender.

3.2 Performance of 'perfection'

Simone De Beauvior (1953), in her one of the most acclaimed work *The Second Sex*, states that, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (p.273). I will pursue this idea of becoming and look at the transition that this entails in the identity of Kumari. This is rather a departure point to analyze the construction of an identity following the hetronormativity as the yardstick to measure the naturalness of an identity. To analyze this connection, I would discuss the selection process through which a Kumari is selected. The selection process of Kumari is divided in the following parts: firstly, the families within the *Baha* are summoned, secondly, the pre-pubescent girl child is selected from amongst the lot, and thirdly she is sent back to her home for a month to be kept under observation in case any untoward incident happens. In that case her nomination can be cancelled. It is only after one month she is brought to Kumari *Chen* or Kumari *Ghar* and her tenure as Kumari begins. After the installation process, Kumari's body supposedly becomes the abode of goddess Taleju till her departure as Kumari. The installation process consists of initiation rituals that transfer the goddess from the previous Kumari to the chosen one inside the Taleju temple on the *Kalratri* (dark night). That night she is supposed to walk around the heads of decapitated buffaloes without showing any fear or uneasiness. It is only after the passing of the ordeal she is declared as the new Kumari. Once declared as Kumari she remains in the post until she reaches the age of puberty or bleeds due to any other reason.

There have been many speculations regarding what happens inside the Taleju temple in ultimate secrecy during the initiation night. Several reports have been circulated giving frightening details of the initiation night which have been denied by previous Kumaris. It looks like the rituals remain vague and are shared only by the Kumari and a handful of priests who are authorized to take part in it. I see Kumari as a performing personification rather than a goddess. I acknowledge

the other side of her identity immersed in myriad facets of performance. I place Kumari in the guise of a performer who goes through a standardized performance structure that includes practice, rehearsal, audition, mimesis and perfection. In this process, what emerges significant is the idea of perfection and its performance.

This idea of perfection begins with selection of a girl to be a Kumari. A girl-child's potential to become Kumari does not just reside on her prowess but in her caste identity as well. In this consideration Kumari's Shakya caste identity remains more important than anything else.[35] Her family should not only be a member of *Baha* but also should be free of any inter-caste marriages. If the aforesaid points are not taken into consideration, then the girl child would not even be nominated. It is not a seen, but felt practice that a child goes through to become aware of herself as a girl first, starting from an early tender age. Every girl in Nepal is considered as a form of goddess and so making a public announcement of a particular girl from a certain community as goddess would only validate that belief in a universal manner. Whether one gets that status of goddess or not that remains a different matter. The practice gradually turns into a daily rehearsal as the child grows and the imposition of certain code of conduct gets marked not only on her body, but also in her psyche. The act can be seen as what Judith Butler (1993) would say, the process of '*girling*' (p.7, 232). In Butler's view, the process starts right after the child is born and named. She writes, "the term or, rather, its symbolic power, governs the formation of corporeally enacted femininity that never fully approximates the norm" (p.232). The social roles precede the self and it is the predetermined set of roles that direct an individual either to conform to it or be reduced to a non-existent being. In this regard, Jeremy Cover (2005) discusses about the 'pressure' starting from childhood itself to make one fit into the already constructed social structure, creating a fluid identity out of the situation and performances we engage in (p.154,157). This situation is a smaller part of the larger identity politics that remains with an individual with an aim to authorize each and every step that s/he takes. The tendency to shed off the situation or get away from it may result in the disappearing of the identity. It is said that mothers of the potential Kumari dream of Kumari when they are pregnant with the child. Not only that, even the child after she is born shows a unique sense of patience unlike the children of her age. This means that the child has her first spectator in her home as they await her to display those signs that would take her closer to

[35] This caste criteria often varies, for example Shakya in case of Kathmandu and Bhaktapur Kumari and Vajracharya in case of Patan Kumari.

becoming a goddess. As the number of spectator rises with her exposure to the selection process, her capability of becoming Kumari also plays a key role in the progression.

The first and important criteria of that perfection being the caste. Childhood can be considered as the second most important criteria. Exceptionally beautiful with a blemish and birthmark free radiant skin is considered as some of the other *lakshanas* which the child should possess. The idea of perfection is based on *battis lakshan*s (thirty-two characteristics) of a bodhisattva, for instance the chest of a lion, a neck like a conch shell, eyelashes like a cow, body like a banyan tree, the thighs of a deer, small and well-recessed sexual organs, voice soft and clear like a duck and so on and so forth (Tree, 2014:6). The wife of *Mul Purohit* does a physical examination of the child to see for the above *lakshan*s before approving her as the next Kumari. It would be unusual to find these characteristics in a three to four years old child and hence Rashmila Shakya mentions that it is more of horoscopic information that is considered rather than the physical attributes (p.16). Although one cannot ignore the fact that there is a comparison of a child to those characteristics speaks a volume of the child as not seen as a child but as a matured woman; a full grown goddess in this context. Michelle Duffy (2005) argues that it is not the body that gives identity to the subject, instead the identity is attributed to the 'subject through signifying practices that create identity' (p.680-81). She gives an example of the Festival of Asian Music and Dance, 1991, where a white dancer Holmes performs the Kathak dance form. Duffy writes, "Holmes is a white dancer and her inauthenticity in relation to expectations of the correct body to perform kathak dance becomes a signifier of a wider cultural inauthenticity (p.686)." She mentions how Holmes' performance was received precisely because of her white body that did not conform to the ethnically identified non-white body. The idea of a perfect body or 'valued and a valuable body' is directly proportional to the structure of social cohesion. Kumari's body is not just a physical presence, but it is a socio-historical writing (Butler, 1993:22). Urmimala Sarkar Munsi (2010) explains how a body engaged in various activities like sitting, writing, thinking, habits, gestures, demonstrations and so on "emerge out of cultural practices, verbal or not, that construct corporeal meaning" (p.187). The authenticity of Kumari's body is an amalgam of her caste identity, her ethnic identity and the social conflicts that must have been fought for by the community to give legitimacy to the body of a Newari Shakya/ Vajracharya virgin girl.

It is this audition part after which her versatility as a performer is prepared for the public and the private, as her performance is toned up according to the framework of a fierce yet

benevolent goddess. As Kumari ascends the throne she is expected to behave like a goddess should be. This expectation not only comes from the interior of *Chen* but also from the outside world of spectators. She is not called by her pre-Kumari name and is always referred to as *Dyah Meiju* not only by her caretakers but even by her parents. There is a constant reiteration of her social identity on the verge of merging with her personal identity or at least appears to be so. There is a sense of imitating the identity of being a Kumari where certain acts are considered goddess-like and certain humane. Kumari is not supposed to engage in a verbal communication with her worshippers, nor is she is supposed to smile at them or have any physical contact with them other than accepting their offerings and put a *tika* on their forehead. Kumari maintains a stern look during her public worship, not letting any sort of emotional expression that can be expected out of a small child. She retains her position as she retains her posture and an external exhibition of how a goddess should behave following the modality of the goddess according to the idea of being a goddess.

While studying the performative identity of Kumari as a standard collective, are we trying to undermine or just ignore her own identity besides being that of a goddess? Davesh Soneji (2012), in his work on *Devadasi* tradition of South India suggests that although lost in the garb of classical, but the 'mnemonic iteration through the act of performance' is effective in terms of individual identity (p.188). More than a 'collective memory' it is the 'individual remembering' that generates an individual meaning and identity of a *Devadasi* (Ibid.). In case of Kumari also there is a hint of an alternative identity which remains firmly wrapped up inside the constructed one and if not in the public spaces, but the traces of it can definitely be visible within the privacy of the Kumari *Chen.* The possibility of this statement finds life in one of the incidents that Shakya talks about during her tenure as the Kathmandu Kumari. She talks about how she used to pass her time when she was not busy doing her job as a goddess. Shakya mentions that she would go upstairs in her room and stand in front of the large, glass covered portrait of King Mahendra, King Birendra's father and his predecessor. She would use them as mirror and perform some of the dance numbers that she had seen in Hindi and Nepali movies (p.33). She writes, "If I were not a goddess, sometimes I think I would like to be a dancer (Ibid.)." That sequence is so clear in my consciousness that I feel as if I was also a part of that moment as it happened and spectators among the likes of kings. One crucial thing to be addressed here is that she did not keep both the identities of a goddess and a dancer in the same plain. Even though being a dancer was closer to her skin than being a goddess, she chose to keep it within the four walls of her room. It does strike me hard

to realize that her understanding of accommodating only one identity at a time was an outcome of that reiteration which allows room for only one; she chose being a goddess. Another example is that of a former Patan Kumari Samita Vajracharya sitting gracefully and playing the *Sarod* (a kind of lute) in a completely engrossed manner (anubhuti, 2014). In an interview with Tree, she said she wants to become a musician and that is where her love for *sarod* is visible (Tree, 2015). Despite of the fact that she was chosen for performing an identity, she also chose an identity for herself. It did not get effaced as her passion for music brought her closer to that quest for her own identity which was on the verge of extinction.

This process of becoming Kumari can be viewed through Catherine Bell's concept of transformation through ritual, where the social identity overshadows the mortal identity. Bell writes:

> only ritual can transform a boy or girl into an adult, an animal into a gift to the gods, and the realm of the gods into a presence responsive to human needs while still maintaining all the boundaries that enable these categories to organize reality (1997:44).

It is a gradual process where every phase of transformation takes her a step away from her own identity of evolving all the time to a fixed identity of a goddess opening an interesting tussle between social and physiological transformation. Bell's conceptual framework helps us to understand how the process is a well-structured plot that leads to the creation of Kumari as a symbol of power in the Nepalese society. But it is not just the ritual sphere that legitimizes the becoming of Kumari; ritual merely sanctions the right to transformation, whereas performing perfection comes from various quarters starting from the girl's childhood. When six years old Unika Vajrachraya of Patan was on her way to the Haka Bahal for the selection process, she engages herself in a conversation with Isabella Tree. As Tree asks her what she'll do if she is chosen as Kumari she replies, "I'll keep quiet, I won't be allowed to go to school. I'll study at home and receive worship every day" (Tree, 2015). It is the embodied behavioral patterns and the external costumes like the red dress, *mokut* (head dress), the third eye, bangles, rings and the most powerful jewelry called *naga* that adorns her or be it the supposed power that it ignites within her. Victor Turner (1980) discusses about the transforming nature of performance within a given frame and its rules applied. He says that there is still the possibility of the flow of action and inter-action within that frame that may give rise to "unprecedented in-sights and even generate new symbols

and meanings, which may be incorporated into subsequent performances" (p.160). It is a continuous procedural reminder of the 'relatively cyclical and repetitive societies' to Kumari to play the role as perfectly as she can as it is only through the idea of perfection that Kumari is viewed by the spectator: perfect body, perfect gestures and perfect goddess (p.165). The idea is to incorporate as much as can be possible to make Kumari a symbol of perfection within the frame of performance.

Erving Goffman (1956) puts forward his idea of 'social role' not only through the perspective of the individual or performer, but also the audience (p.9). He argues that the social relationship between the performer and the audience is established when there is a presence of what he terms 'defensive practices', where the performer defends his/her position through employed strategies and 'protective practices', where an audience protects the projected image of the performer (p.7). He further points out that the individual or performer will 'act in a thoroughly calculating manner, expressing himself in a given way solely' to generate the expected response from the audience (p.3). What is striking here is the calculating manner and the given way which exposes the rigidity of the social construct that no one can escape, not even gods and goddesses. I argue that this essence of perfection germinates from this very idea of calculated mannerism. I do intend to borrow Goffman's idea of calculated manner and look at it through the prism of perfection. Is perfection achieved through a well-designed mannerism or does it reside in the freedom to perform one's own self escaping the straight-jacketed system of rules? In the context of Kumari, there is a long list of 'formal signs' when a worshipper worships her and all these signs are studied closely in order to interpret what they mean (Allen, 1989:75). For instance, rule no. 16 in the rule book says that "If she should talk without eating the worshipper's spouse will die" (Ibid.). Now the question is what if she really wanted to talk to the worshipper and was not in a mood to eat at all? What if the worshipper is unmarried? And the most important question is who decides this list and on what basis? There has to be past incidents of grave nature that must have shaped the given list in order to prevent them from happening again. On the other hand, what we see here is not about what would harm the worshippers if Kumari behaves in a certain manner, but how a Kumari should behave in order to prevent any wrongdoing to her worshippers. It is concealed in a well-crafted mechanism of dos's and don'ts for Kumari instead rather than the worshippers on whose shoulder does not reside the responsibility of performing perfection. As Kumari becomes what she is expected to be through the performance of her social role, her own

self of may be of a dancer is lost like a distant dream refusing to identify with her at any cost. The mere possibility to materialize that dream might get wings only when she goes back to her home after her tenure; where the reality of her self-identity may get an opportunity to be performed, or maybe not.

3.3 Split Performativity and the state of 'performing': Pre and Post Kumari

Rashmila Shakya remembers her last day as Kumari as follows:

> In the morning the familiar figure of Guruju, one of the five Pancha Buddha, arrived and performed puja with me for the last time. Then the family offered me sagun, for the final time as a goddess. After that my hair was taken down. It would never be pulled up tightly in a bun again, though I still like it tied back. Following the change of hairstyle and clothes, I was offered sagun again. This time it was offered to me not to Kumari, and strictly speaking, from this time on I was no longer a goddess (Shakya, 2012:72).

It was one of the most difficult phase for Shakya as she left her position and returned back home. She writes, "I knew it wouldn't be easy, in fact I knew I would have to be virtually reborn" (p.80). She felt more at home while she was with her caretakers than she was amidst her parents and five siblings. For Shakya, it was the second half of her tenure that she remembers vividly as she was too young to recollect her life before crossing the threshold of Kumari *Chen*. One thing for sure she was no longer the same person as she was before her tenure although she was believed to be back to her mortal state again. I argue that it is not possible to club Kumari's pre and post identities under one category. Her identity has evolved over the years so much so that it is a symbolic death of her previous lives in order to live again. That the transformation of a girl-child from a mortal to the identity of goddess and then back to mortal does not bring her back to the same mortal identity that she possessed. I view this transformation in a many-layered structure where the identities are split into three or may be more parts and so is the performance. Richard Schechner (1981) gives the example of Naradmuni in the Ramlila of Ramnagar where the performer who impersonates the

role is actually looked upon as the mythological character even when he is out of the said role. He has earned the name of the character and is called not by his born name, not even by himself (p.87). Schechner writes:

> Narad never claims to be an incarnation of Nard-muni. But each year at Ramlila his connection to Narad-muni is renewed, deepened, and ritualized before an audience of thousands. This man is not Narad-muni, but also he is not not Narad-muni (p.88).

There is a tussle between the 'not' and the 'not not' because it is in this in between-ness where the prospect of an identity takes birth and which has the capacity to change the whole course of identity making process. In case of Kumari, the process is more complex because her life gets split in many parts and hence it is not a linear route but an outcome of various intersecting lives woven together. As the lives are created and performed, what we observe is a network of socially, religiously, culturally and politically splattered split bodies, identities and personalities pulling Kumari from all the sides trying hard to stabilize her within a specific form and shape of social value. Kumari is thus reduced to one manufactured identity whereas the girls performing that role are always in the state of evolving, sometimes trying to remain Kumari and at times attempting to slither away skillfully, just like a snake leaves its old skin to flaunt the new one.

Human Rights lawyer Pun Devi Maharjan, who had filed a petition in the Supreme Court of Nepal against the Kumari tradition as a form of child labour, subsequently failed to abolish it altogether. However, due to this intervention there have been changes in the education and medical care of Kumaris in the present scenario. The present Kumari of Kathmandu and Patan have private tutors, whereas the Bhaktapur Kumari goes to school like any other child of her age. Maharjan states that the human rights of Kumari is violated during her tenure and nobody cares what happens after Kumari's retirement (Journeyman Pictures, 2007). In fact, it is most sought after information about what happens to the girl after she retires. There have been many speculations, mostly of degrading nature, related to marriage and survival sources due to lack of education and skills. Dil Maya Shakya, a former Kathmandu Kumari in her seventies, explains how she had to struggle doing common household works as she was not used to it. She did lead a luxurious life in Kumari *Chen* but as she stepped out of it her life took a toll on her. She did not receive any monetary grant from the king, nor could she earn a living as she was an illiterate and devoid of any skills

(Journeyman Pictures, 2015). Almost all of the Kumaris have collectively raised concern regarding the lack of education and it was only during Amita Shakya's tenure that her father Amrit Shakya personally requested the king to arrange for his daughter's education so that her transition post-retirement is smoother than the previous Kumaris (Al Jazeera English, 2007). It is a wide spread rumour that one cannot marry a former Kumari as she is supposedly still potent enough to emasculate any man because of her previous status. Some rumours even go to the extent of saying that snakes slither out of her vagina on the wedding night and that due to this they cannot marry and hence resort to sex work as a way of livelihood. I prefer to call them rumour because we still do not have a single witness who could come forward and prove it. On the other hand, most of the Kumaris be it in Kathmandu, Patan or Bhaktapur are married and living normal conjugal lives. What I see here is how the profiling of former Kumaris give them an alternate identity in order to create a sense of mysticism and fear. They already feel scattered and incompetent as they complete their tenure. And with these kinds of parallel profiling they might feel deeply ostracized and out of place; an identity they would not want to perform or rather be associated with.

Chanira Bajracharya, a former Patan Kumari says, "When you give the goddess's ornaments and throne to someone else, it feels like someone has died. You're in mourning" (Tree, 2015). This sense of loss and nostalgia is an urge to regain that life which is, if nothing, but familiar. There is also a deep embedded fear of not being able to cope with a completely different life of any ordinary teenaged girl in Nepal. It is a sudden realization of a nightmare that would snatch away that very life she had learned to belief was her own. Many former Kumaris have fondly remembered their Kumari period as against the world view of a secluded and ritualized life. There is an uneasiness of coming out of that comfort zone where she has to take decision for herself be it important ones or just crossing a busy street on her own. Shakya recollects the terrible experiences she had to go through for some time when she could not walk easily and 'clomped like a horse' as observed by one of her sisters (p.78). On the other hand, Chanira, an extrovert by nature explained how difficult she found to engage in a conversation and had inhibitions to present her work in the midst of her whole class (Tree, 2015). As the former Kumaris struggled to adjust in their lives post the Kumari period, most of their mothers, on the other hand, delighted in the fact they were home. For instance, Chanira's mother Champa Bajracharya says:

> I did not want my daughter to be a Kumari. Whether you agree to it or not the spirit of the goddess comes and chooses her successor. We already had a Kumari in the family. We did not take her to the choosing ceremony (Al Jazeera English, 2007).

Former Kumari Amita Shakya's father Amrit Shakya stressed on the ignorance of the former goddesses as they come out of the given role. He says, "If I name a place my daughter won't know where that is" (Ibid.). By the time she retires Kumari becomes a child once again learning and trying hard to cope up with baby steps, oblivious of what is in store for her. In this way she is very similar to the life she had before becoming Kumari, if not same. Here I put forward Schechner's idea of transformation and transportation to illustrate my argument. He writes:

> I call performances where performers are changed as "transformations" and those where performers are returned to their starting places "transportations". "Transportation" because during the performance the performers are "taken somewhere" but at the end, often assisted by others, they are "cooled down" and reenter ordinary life just about where they went in (Schechner, 1981:91).

In the context of Kumari, I see it not as a simple transformation and transporation cycle, but as a structure of multiple cycles intersecting one another at certain point creating a spiral-like pattern that might retain a little of both: pre and post Kumari life. It becomes essential to question if the Kumari's lived-experience (from mundane to specific) can be seen as this case of spiral movement as against the general idea of it being considered as a cyclical transformation that simplifies the actual complex web. It appears that the transition from one identity to the next is an irreversible sequence and hence does not bring her back to the same state that she started with. It is that theatrical moment which changes her duties as a goddess and prepares her to be a part of a larger group of devotees and leave that position for another child succeeding her. What remains absolute is the identity of Kumari no matter who performs it as it gets filled up by a new child every now and then. The identity of Kumari is not open to compromise, hence it remains where it is, showing no signs of evolution. As a result, the flowing nature of performers performing that role lends the whole tradition of Kumari a fluid image; it is the continued presence of those performers taking refuge in the stagnant identity of Kumari that keeps the ball rolling, enhancing the fluidity of the

performance. Although each child performs the role for a certain period and leaves the scene which might give an idea of the completion of performance itself, in other words reaching a 'performed' state, but one should not mistake it for the completion of the Kumari's role altogether. The performers might alter, but the Kumari's role performance is always in the state of 'performing'; performers change but the role does not. Just as the goddess Taleju is supposed to reside in the child, so does the child fills up the empty vase of Kumari keeping the tradition alive and performing many challenging roles in one lifetime.

3.4 (Un)performing Puberty

In a report dated 21 July, 2015, The Times of India states:

> When a massive earthquake struck Nepal in April, Nepal's longest-serving "living goddess" was forced to do the unthinkable-walk the streets for the first time in her life. Still following the cloistered life style she entered at the age of two, Dhana Kumari Bajracharya also opened up about her unusually long 30-year reign, suggesting the pain of unceremonious dethroning in the 1980s was still raw (The Times of India, 2015).

Dhana Kumari (Fig. 20) was chosen as the Patan Kumari in the year 1954 and she officially held that position for three decades before being replaced by another child. One would wonder what made that possible since Kumari is supposed to leave that position when she attains puberty. In the case of Dhana Kumari it was different because she never attained puberty and it was her claim to retain the status of goddess for such a long period. I put forward this curious case of Dhana Kumari and formulate my argument around the idea of performing puberty and use it as a cultivated intervention in order to subvert the carefully-dimensioned gender hierarchy.

I would first talk about two mock marriage ceremonies where puberty is being performed: the *ihi* (mock marriage between ages of 4 and 10) and *barha* (mock-menstruation and mock-marriage between 10 and 15) respectively. These ceremonies bind the Newari girls within the gender hierarchy and create an alternate gendered space. Both these ceremonies are pre-menstrual

where the girls are symbolically married to *bel* (wood apple) and the Sun[36]. These ceremonies or rites of passage clearly demarcates between the virgin, pre-pubescent girls and married, non-virgin girls. Shakya notes:

> These "marriages" are considered so important that a girl who has gone through either of them is no longer considered to be completely virgin, and so is ineligible to become Kumari, the Virgin Goddess (Shakya, 2012:15).

It is only once Kumari retires from her post that she goes through these mock marriages as a symbolic practice to demonstrate her married status in general, and marriageable stage to the community in particular. Hence, the Newari women are twice married before tying their knot to a human husband. *Ihi* is a three-day ceremony where the father of the girl performs *kanya daan* (virgin girl gift) to the fruit and confirms the relationship followed by a feast, whereas, *barha* is a rather bigger event where the girls are supposed to stay in dark rooms for twelve days with a strict unpolluted diet and are not allowed to see a male person. It is on the twelfth day they are showed to the sun (the groom) by making a hole on the door thereby letting the sunrays fall on the girls (Allen, 2000:214-232). It is again followed by a big feast and celebration to let the world know that their daughter is of age now. Allen points out that the most common reason for these ceremonies is protection from either 'malicious spirits' or 'stigma of widowhood' (Ibid. 225). I bring this notion of protection as a control strategy where a female person is considered to be the weaker sex who is always supposed to be in the need of protection. Bert van den Hoek and Bal Gopal Shrestha (1992) describes the tradition of training the Daitya and Kumar dancers, who protect Taleju, while her image is being carried up and down the stairs of Taleju temple during Dasain. They write, "The powerful Bhavani thus appears to need protectors (raksak) at the critical moments of transition, those of descending and ascending her temple abode" (p.193). The moments between this 'transition' can turn the goddess to a woman when she would need protection, if not at all times because the dancers perform only for that short period of transition. Also during the *Indra Jatra*, Ganesh and Bhairava's chariot is allowed to pass first and then Kumari's chariot is pulled off, thereby re-enforcing the idea of 'protection' provided by male gods. If we compare these ceremonies to *Bare chuegu* (initiation ceremony of Newari boys) we do not

[36] One important factor in the selection of Kumari is the girl should not go through any of these ceremonies in order to participate in the selection process.

find this concept of protection and is solely performed to gain caste-membership only. On the other hand, Allen states that it is considered that an unmarried yet sexually mature girl is both an 'anomaly and a potential danger to the adult residents especially males' (Ibid. 213). Thus, it is the danger of female reproductive sexuality that endangers the existence of male in the society. This brings us to enquire if the ceremonies are molded, not liable to be questioned and hence silencing the female body through instigating the stigmatization of virtual puberty and marriage.

Arnold van Gennep has analyzed that the physiological puberty and social puberty are not the same thing and that they 'rarely converge' (p.65). He argues that the initiation rites are actually the 'rites of separation from the asexual world' followed by 'rites of incorporation into the world of sexuality' (Ibid. 67). There is a sense of expectation from the person concerned in the rite to get matured suddenly and also be aware of one's sexed identity as an accompaniment in that environment. The practices are embodied into the girl's conscience for which a verbal communication is rarely required to make her fully cognizant not of her sexuality but of her sex and the refined construct within which her body is framed. It can be said that she bleeds in the imagination of the social, she bleeds in her own imagination and she bleeds to conform to the phallocentric hegemonic order. But the question arises is what happens when a Kumari does not submit to this order or does not go through any of the puberties mentioned be it physiological or social? Will she still remain as Kumari? This is where Dhana Kumari defies both social and the physiological dynamics. She defends her position which can be an apt example to discuss the possibility of puberty as a tool of gendered performance. As mentioned in the news report she was hurt by the 'unceremonious dethroning', even though she never attained puberty. She could have continued her post technically however, she was removed on the ground that she must have bled due to some other reason, which could never be proven whatsoever. While she was stripped off her status officially, she persisted in her demands to remain as Kumari. She is still worshipped by a handful of her loyal worshippers. On the other hand, discarding her demands, an official asserted:

> She cannot remain Kumari that way because another girl has to replace her if she suffers from mental disorder or she must have definitely bled when she lost her tooth. She can't be Kumari forever. If she loses her teeth, laughs too much, starts menstruation or has a mental disorder, she is

> stripped of her status and a new Kumari is selected (Journeyman Pictures, 2007).

Many girls have served as Patan Kumari from 1980s onwards simultaneously with Dhana Kumari, out of which Chanira being her niece. Dhana Kumari never left her house and did not even enjoy the chariot rides like other Kumaris but she did maintain her status and claimed the goddess had not left her body. Had it not been the earthquake she might have been still sitting in one of the dark rooms of her house doing what she knew best: performing Kumari while accepting offering from her worshippers every now and then. Whether she suffers from mental disorder or not is a different question, but what intrigues me is the way she has defied the order of the society by using the same tool that is being deployed to exercise control over Kumari's identity. If (un)performing puberty is her strategic move to subvert the morphology of the society she is a part of, she has been performing that role for quite a long time and may be her sense of losing that role might also mean losing the agency altogether. Her body became an expression of a virtuous body that supposedly inhabited Taleju, before being subjected to represent an abject body what Butler calls the '"unlivable" and "uninhabitable" zones of social life'(Butler, 1993:3). Butler gives stress on how meanings are not constructed by inside, but outside of what it is not. There is this threshold which need to be ascertained first; the periphery and the exclusiveness of one territory defines the other. Butler writes:

> One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one's body and, indeed, one does one's body differently from one's contemporaries and from one's embodied predecessors and successors as well (Butler, 1988:521).

Dhana Kumari's body oscillates in between which gives it a new meaning of being a liminal body. It is the state of endless liminality and her liminal body that not only creates a space for performance, but equally becomes a performative in its own right. The liminal body stands on the threshold, controlling and redefining its identity repeatedly; (un)performing puberty that validates her social role of Kumari.

In response to Kumari's removal due to puberty age or bleeding, Tree writes, "The reason the Kumari herself could not bleed was not because blood would contaminate her, but because the

Kumari contained all the power of life inside her (p.66-67)". It is believed that the flow of blood would only mean loss of energy subsequently weakening the goddess. The menstrual stigma is not attached to the statement, whereas I argue that the bleeding of Kumari is relegated to puberty and stigmatization more than any other reason. There is not a single case which has come onboard that shows any Kumari being replaced because of any injury while in office. Menstrual stigma is an important factor in the context of Nepalese society and it would not be an exaggeration to say that many menstruating women have to go through a temporary seclusion or social boycott period every month in order to maintain purity. It is said that the Royal massacre of 2001 itself was a gruesome outcome of untimely puberty of the then Kumari. Kumari had developed some blotches in her body twenty four days before the massacre which was considered as an indication of an imminent danger that was to befall (Ibid. 134-135). After a meeting with the Royal astrologer Dr. M. R. Joshi, Tree writes:

> At first, when the ominous signs began to appear on the Kumari's body, spreading to her face, the priests did all they could to appease the Goddess and cure the Kumari of the complaint. They appealed to the palace for the king to send special offerings but none came. The monarch, they were told, was busy. Then, about twelve days later, Mr. Joshi said, the unthinkable happened. The Kumari began to bleed. Her menstruation had arrived without warning (Ibid.).

In a case study of menstrual stigma in Nepal, Mary Crawford, Lawrence M. Menger and Michelle R. Kaufman (2014) conducted a group study where the Nepalese women of Kathmandu shared their experiences of menstrual stigma and stigma management strategies. One common point that all of them agreed upon was that they would relax all the other activities like cooking, sleeping in the bed and so on which are restricted otherwise, but they would not touch god during that period (p.436). The authors have tried to point out the conflict that arises between the enacted stigma and felt stigma where the former enacts the act of discrimination and the latter is the feeling of shame for violating the rules clearly evident in the religious structure of Nepal. They write, "In Nepal, religious rituals surrounding menstruation make it more visible and much more stigmatizing" (Ibid. 435). In Nepal, menstruation is a public affair and because of these religious activities everyone comes to know if a woman is menstruating or not. I think this case study is helpful to

understand what the half of the section of society goes through and how they cope with the stigmatization in their day to day lives which itself is a reflection of how society functions or behaves. However, having said that, one major problem that I had with the case study was that the sample was taken from the city only and they had a proper format of the people they wanted to include in the study. It said, "To be included in the study, a woman had to be a Nepali resident of the Kathmandu city area, over the age of 18 and fluent in English" (Ibid. 429). Firstly, its exclusivist nature would definitely not yield an inclusive study. Secondly, the major problem of menstrual stigmatization is more in remote areas amongst the uneducated (who cannot understand English, let alone speak fluently) than in city. And, lastly, by 18 one is more aware than a 12-year-old who has just attained puberty and is fighting her own war against stigmatization. Thus, I find the study lacking in its nature and would look forward to a more inclusive study which would bring a fuller outcome and generate better discussion. But my take away from this study is related to the religious sentiment and it does not escape my notice that even in city where so much of fear of menstrual pollution is encoded that Kumari's bleeding cannot seem to be limited to just loss of energy only and not menstrual stigma. Whether we accept it or not, puberty actually becomes a marker to measure the purity of Kumari and the goddess-ness that she carries inside her. Until Kumari reaches puberty, she lives a life of in-betweeness and transition, which Bjorn Thomassen (2014) says, "mark us, they stamp our personalities, and that is the way it will always be" (p.4). On the other hand, it takes me back again to Dhana Kumari who has been under constant criticism for not bowing down to the said stigma and continuing her performance through her menstrual-stigma free body.

3.5 Female Impersonation/ Goddess Impersonification

I shift the discussion from Kumari performing the role to Kumari being performed on stage in the *Devi Pyakham* (Devi Dance) (Fig. 21) in the town of Sankhu and Kathmandu.

As the night approaches, and the stage is set with the spectators sitting around forming a circle, three masked dancers take the centre-stage and deliver a trance-like dance with heavy hands and feet movements, striking their swords in unison as the drum beat changes. The audience

remains awe-struck as the movement catches the rhythm of the accompanied music and the heavy jingling anklets producing music out of their unidentified bodies. Just like they appeared abruptly so did they exit. In a moment's glance they vanished into thin air leaving no trace behind (Shrestha, 2013).

This dance form started as a Buddhist tradition, however, with the passage of time, various inter-cultural exchanges took place and, as a result, the Hindu influence became more and more strong. Considered as dominant ritualistic dance form, it is performed by young Newari boys belonging to the Shrestha caste, in between *Kayastmi* (four days before *Indra Jatra*) and Dasain, not until Tihar (Diwali) and is never performed during the *Vajroyogini Yatra* (Shrestha, 1996:255). Bal Gopal Shrestha writes:

> In Newari the word, pyakham is used for both dance and drama. But the tradition of pyakham which is based on the stories of gods and goddesses consists mostly of dance and ballads. The Devi pyakham of Kathmandu and the Devi pyakham of Sankhu were developed in that tradition (Shrestha, 1996:255).

The *Pyakham* consists of three major characters called Devi (Kumari), Bhairava and Candi along with a separate group of comic characters like Kyah (a furry creature), Kavam (skeleton) and Beta (a gentle demon) (Ibid. 259). This performance has more of a ritualistic connotation rather than a mere entertainment value. In Sankhu, the dancers perform in the same songs repeatedly, do not have an organized dance sequence and keep the comical characters separated from the dance. In the performance of Kathmandu there is an arranged sequence in which the comical characters merge with the dancers (Ibid.). As it evolved as an oral tradition, it is difficult to locate the exact year when it started, but Shrestha suggests it must have started from the second half of the 19th century onwards (Ibid. 257). In the *Pyakham*, Devi and Candi wear red blouses, red *jama* (long skirt), red masks, *matu* (crowns) with *kikimpa* (little wings) brought from the temple of Vajrayogini. They also wear metal necklaces, bracelets and anklets under their knees to make jingling sounds. On the other hand, Bhairava wears black blouse, black *jama*, black mask and the rest are the same like the Devi and Candi (Ibid. 260). *Devi Pyakham* is a eulogization of the three deities and their powerful status among the worshippers. However, what is striking is the total absence of women in the entire tradition and representation of women by male where not dancers

but even the teachers, musicians and Nasadyo (god of music, dance and drama) are all male. I argue that the *Devi Pyakham* should not be viewed as just another form of female impersonation, as it subverts the very crux of a male body impersonating a female body. It does not fit into the idea of female impersonation, as it has the ability to not only silence the women performers, but completely deny them visibility in a performative space which could also accommodate women performers in the first place. I find myself in an uneasy stifling air as I see the performance, not because of the performers, not because of the performance itself, but because of one fact that no woman will ever relish that taste of performing the dance, thereby it will always remain an unfinished performance.

For the performance the boys having auspicious horoscopes are chosen for the occasion. Not only that, they also have to abide by certain rules and regulations and perform specific rituals till they retire from the post (Ibid. 261). Normally the duration is 5 years, but due to dearth of funds, it can be extended till 10 to 15 years as well. Shrestha writes:

> So in selecting new dancers mostly young boys are chosen, so they can continue to dance for many years. In addition the main leader of the dance says young boys are obedient and reliable and quick in learning to dance, and as dance characters youngsters look more beautiful and attractive (Ibid.).

The search for beautiful and attractive young boys is more important than their own fascination towards the dance and their ability to perform. As the dancers start the training period under the strict supervision of *nayo* (elder or teacher), *me nayo* (song leader) and *mu nayo* (chief leader of dance movements), more and more rituals are added with the passage of time along with the music accompaniments, jewelries and props. They are even taught to shiver while dancing as it works as a marker amongst the audience who believe that the deities are invoked in the dancers. Referring to what one of the dancers had to say, Shrestha writes, "He said he never felt possessed by the deity during his dance, but he has to keep shivering as if possessed. He said he has to do so because he was taught so" (Ibid. 262). During the training process the dancers go through four phases-the transfer of Nasadyo to the training venue, *Ba puja*, a sacrificial worship to Nasadyo Shrine, *Sila taye khakegu puja*, a sacrificial worship to start shivering and finally *Pidanigu* the first performance of the year (Ibid.). It has to be mentioned here that all the sacrificed animals have to

be strictly male except for one occasion when the dancers are required to steal any male or female animals. The sacrificed animals are to be eaten by the whole training group inside the training room and it is strictly observed that the meat is not eaten by any woman (Ibid. 264). Once the training period gets over there is another big sacrifice called *pancabali* performed by the Guthi members which consists of five male animals like Buffalo, Goat, Ram, Duck and a Cock (Ibid. 265). The performance starts after this sacrificial affair, beginning at the temple of Vajrayogini and then moving to other sacred sites.

Rimli Bhattacharya (2003) analyzes the shift from the female impersonators in the jatra culture of Bengal, to the female impersonation among the upper-class practitioners of private theatre (1830s-60s) and the gradual introduction of women performers from 1870s onwards. She talks about the transition in the perception of the audience as male actors performed female characters and how there was a conscious decision to be not looked as jatra performance. She also tries to bring in the notion of acceptability of women (who did not belong to the group of bhadramahila class) on stage and the fear of pollution amongst the young men who frequented the theatre (p.227). There is a sense of longstanding confusion regarding the female characters, because on one hand, the jatra-borrowed female impersonation started to look artificial, and on the other hand, there was this danger of women of questionable status playing various roles. Thus, female impersonation suited the jatra style, but theatre needed an intervention to cater to the expectations of Bengali intelligentsia. She writes, "If, therefore, jatra continued with the female impersonation, it is clear that theatre with other, superior, aspirations, could not" (Ibid. 223). I draw the problem of identification that emerges through the female impersonation and female actors in this context. The identification of male actors with the female characters seemed unreal, whereas, the female actors could not be identified with the femaleness of the good-natured women of Bengali society. On the contrary, as opposed to the reduction of female impersonation more towards the realm of indigenous performance in case of Bengali Theatre, Parsi Theatre used the identification politics to construct a prominent history of female impersonation. Kathryn Hansen (1999) states that it was the social taboo against women performing in public and the seclusion of women of socially upper class within the households gave rise to female impersonation as a theatrical compulsion (p.130). The female impersonators were hugely popular amongst the audience that they were being called by the roles they played (p.133). One of the non-Parsi actors Jayshankar Sundari (1888-1967) had earned the name Sundari because of his portrayal of an

auspicious young wife in *Saubhabya Sundari* at the age of twelve (Ibid. 134). His total identification with a Gujarati woman be it physically or psychologically transformed him into a woman on stage (Ibid. 134-135). This transformation seemed 'natural' and it was with this touch of naturalness that Parsi theatre flourished and so did female impersonation in Parsi theatre. Hansen writes:

> One significant frame or site was the gendered performer's body, the medium through which the performer addressed the public. By the process of refashioning and reworking its appearance, the body was converted into a usable construct for visual pleasure, gender identification and social meaning (Ibid. 131).

I find myself in a third space in between the two kinds of theatre discussed above when I observe the *Devi Pyakham*. The practice of conscious effort to impersonate female role and identification is totally absent in the *Devi Pyakham*; if there is so, the identification is limited to a vague idea of deity and not beyond that. If we look at the training period, it is observed that there is no close contact with the deities or any woman to even form a basis of impersonation. In fact, the training is in close proximity with Nasadyo whose presence is unavoidable and his worship cannot be undermined at any cost. The dancers' bodies, in no way, try to emulate a female body, and hence the possibility of female impersonation is equal to nothing. Apart from the exterior goddesses' appearance of the dancers, they dance in a crude manner, addressing the spectators, without conforming to the idea of femaleness in any way. In fact, I view it as a deliberate attempt to not let their performance be transferred to the constructed concept of being female and not appear to even close to be 'convincing'; a denial to conceal the manufactured male gender characteristics. It is restricted to their costumes, just as they have managed to restrict 'woman' presence at the periphery of the training room.

It is believed that long ago a great tantrist had found Vajrayogini dancing in a courtyard in the Calakhu quarter of Sankhu town. Although she was in the disguise of three children, the tantrist was certain of her real identity. He bound them with *taam taye* (magic spells) and swore to perform the dance in Sankhu every year (Shrestha, 1996:257-258). If we study the myth, it is only the identity of Vajrayogini that gets revealed, who is more popularly known as Kumari giving weightage to the Buddhist claim of this dance form, wherein the other two goddesses must have

been included later. More importantly, the gender identity of those three children is ambiguous and hence, the inclusion of female performers could not be denied altogether, which is not the case. Nowhere is it mentioned that they were young boys belonging to a particular caste. So the question arises if male hierarchy is established to maintain the absence of women in the case of *Devi Pyakham* or, a mere accepted fact that young boys can perform deities' role better? Min Tian (2000) provides an analytical picture of female impersonation in traditional Chinese theatre and how the perception was calculated based on the role type portrayed by the actors. He writes:

> In the Quing dynasty, the huadanac (a young, lovely, or coquettish female role type) played by men was banned time and again because of its ostensible sexual appeal compared with other types of dan such as zhengdanad or qingyiae (virtuous and decent women), which were considered acceptable (p.81).

The notion of what is 'acceptable' on stage may have a potential to define what is 'acceptable' and what is 'not acceptable' off stage. It may also suggest how one has to stay within that limit of acceptability, failing to do so so might invite extreme criticism. In contrast to that, it reminds me of the Gotipua dance form of Odisha. It is a celebrated dance form that involves female impersonators performing love poetries of Radha-Krishna, the essence of sexual encounters and the art of love-making through a mixture of delicate hand gestures and expressions of a female body. In the context of Nepal, it would be acceptable for a girl to perform the social role of a goddess, but it would not be acceptable for her to dance in a trance-like state in order to legitimate her status. It would be 'natural' for a girl to stay within the confines of Kumari *Chen*, but it would not be in her nature to step out of it and dance frantically to the songs of glorification of the very goddess she supposedly represents. *Devi Pyakham* is a repeated assertion to draw the line between the accepted and not accepted social norms. Referring to female impersonation on stage, Nivedita Menon (2011) talks about how the image of a proper woman was constructed on stage. She writes, "The new nationalist bourgeois woman was to learn how to be a proper woman by watching the production of appropriate femininity by the male actor" (Menon, Kafila). In case of *Devi Pyakham*, more than an instruction of how a woman should behave, it is a knowledge system to demonstrate the difference between the goddesses and women and mapping that distance through their male exclusivist parameter. The absence of women may also reduce, if not erase, the posibility of sexual

appeal. In addition to that, the unappealing gestures of the dancers to not promote impression of desire in the spectators may also suggest discouraging homoeroticism and maintain the religious fervour of the performance. Hence, the assumption of male performer doing the job better is uncalled for because more than impersonating the female, it is an act of taking upon itself the responsibility of representating not only the deities, but the rigouros male control over women's absence.

There is a community of tantric dancers who pay their respect to Kumari and likewise fierce goddesses through cross-dressing. They devote their lives in the meditation of goddesses, lead a ritually-bound lives and live a mobile life. A man dressed in a long skirt and hair tied in a topknot wandering around the tantric temple localities is not viewed in a punitive manner. Allen (1989) has referred to them as Jalami, and has mentioned about their 'strange clothes', which he basically meant woman's clothes and their controversial pre-menstrual girl sacrifices to the goddess Harasidhhi[37] every twelve years (p.68-69). On the other hand, Tree also talks about one of her encounters with a Jalami in Kumari *Chen* and informs that they perform dances like the Navadurga dance of Bhaktapur, and even though they can get married, they would be identified as female for the rest of their lives (Tree, 2014:342). In the modern context, it would not be surprising to label them as transvestite or performances like *Devi Pyakham* within the category of drag performance. It is easier to locate the performance within a given catalogue, however, what needs to be done here is to first relocate it within the South Asian sphere, which is more governed by socio-religio-cultural matrix. Butler is vocal about the experiences a transvestite goes through on and off stage according to the given social conventions. The audience might be considerate to a transvestite on stage, but the same transvestite might compel an adverse reaction if the same transvestite sits on the next seat in a bus (Butler, 1988:527). One reason she provides is the distinction between what is real and what is not. She writes:

> Because of this distinction, one can maintain one's sense of reality in the face of this temporary challenge to our existing ontological assumptions about gender arrangements; the various conventions which announce that

[37] Goddess Harasidhhi symbolizes triple deity consisting of Kumari, Bhairavi and Harasidhhi.

> ‘this is only a play’ allows strict line to be drawn between the performance and life (p.527).

It is crucial to point out that in terms of cross-dressing in Nepal and other South Asian context, apart from the on/off stage space, there arises a third spatial formation which is the ritual space. A Devi dancer might be ridiculed if he goes beyond that ritual space settings, but the moment he is within the boundary of that space, he becomes an object of veneration and worship. A Jalami might become an eyesore and out of place if he enters a space where his attire and identity is not acknolwedged, but unless he goes beyond that, he would not have to explain and defend himself. Hence, transvesite might have to be utilized in South Asian context with many more footnotes, as the identification of one identity with a particular space has potential to change the way one looks at cross-dressing. Since the idea of cross-dressing comes from not only one’s liking to dress so, but the ritualistic and religious contours are given equal weightage.

While Munsi points out that body becomes the ‘mediator’ (Dutta and Munsi, 2010:187) to externalize the image formed in the inner space of mind, made visible through bodily experiences, Butler further talks about how gender is an outcome of interior effect of a constituted gender reality that shows on the outer surface of the body (Butler,1990:185-186). Butler refers to that reality as a fabrication manufactured by the differentiating nature of a ‘decidedly public and social discourse’ (Ibid.). Thus, she states that if gender is an outcome of this fabrication and fantasized truth, then gender can be ‘produced as truth effects of a primary and stable identity’ (Ibid.). Her take on drag performances germinates from the discourse of this dichotomy of inner truth and external characterisation. She asserts that what drag does is subvert this dichotomy and makes a mockery of ‘the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity’ (Ibid.). What Butler tries to exemplify is that the problem of gender construct lies in the very fact that gender can and is imitated and hence it is ‘falsely naturalized’ (Ibid.). She writes, “drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itslef-as well as it contingency” (Ibid.). I stress on this idea of imitation and try to see if there is any attempt to imitate gender in *Devi Pyakham*. I do agree with Butler’s view on what drag does, but what *Devi Pyakham* does is ambiguous and further problematizes the concept of gender structure as I do not see a binary between which an imitation can be positioned. For the imitation to take place at least a binary is required, although there can be many more layered structures. Rather than mocking, *Devi Pyakahm* tries to establish a notion

of one gender idenitity, where the posibility of the dichotomy of inner and outer psyche seems to get blurred or deliberatetly clubbed together. *Devi Pyakham* brings me to a tricky domain no doubt, but it also clarifies my position as to what would be the closest possible term that I may be able to use for this performance: impersonification of Kumari rather than female impersonation, lingering in between ritual and transvestism.

3.6 Beyond Sex and Gender: The alterior being

> What little girl wouldn't love dressing up and being the centre of attention? But of course I was not just a little girl, I was a goddess, the emanation of Taleju Bhawani, and I had to remain on my dignity through the photographers, and the people throwing flowers and coins and bowing down to me (Shakya, 2012:49).

The act of engendering the performance of Kumari and the performance of gender through Kumari has the potential to throw open a discussion on the idea that Kumari is believed to represent apart from that of a pre-pubescent girl and an incarnation of Taleju. I argue that it is not a linear passage that decides the gender performativity of Kumari; gender ambiguity is another state that Kumari demonstrates through various quarters. There is a thin blurring line that places Kumari on either sides of an already constructed gender norms defying her immediate identity. For instance, at times the engendering is so much imbibed through the imposition of the gendered act of mothering, while at other times Kumari's identity is symbolized as the merger of the male and female dichotomy. Studying Kumari becomes more complex when her identity goes beyond sex and genders as she is symbolized as an alterior being devoid of any gendering. Kumari's role performance keeps altering so much so that her non-genderedness can also be seen as one of her attributes which, on most occasion remains dormant or overlooked. Mellowship informs that in tantrism it is believed that the body parts are gendered where the hardness of the roof of the mouth is 'masculine', the softness of the mobile tongue is 'feminine'and so on (Mellowship, 2007:42). In the same way, when Kumari is worshipped, she is given food items symbolizing female and male components: peeled duck egg followed by dried fish, symbolizing 'the primordial swimmer-

sperm meeting ovum' (Tree, 2014:325). This unison of male and female constituents symbolically get materialized in her body. It is likely that this practice is influenced by the tantric beliefs and is a symbolic reiteration of that belief through the feeding act. Vivienne Kondos (2001) mentions that the male and female components are co-present in the body, but the distinction between them depends on 'which set predominates' (p.94). The room for domination can be seen as the basis of difference that gender promotes. Hence, I turn this discussion from a balancing componentry act to the act of biasness that itself is a reflection of how gender is constructed and imposed in the social sphere. Kumari has to go through a strict physical examination, has to leave her family and stay in Kumari *Chen*, has to be a part of *nitya puja* (daily worship) all throughout her reign, and has to follow customs in every possible way. However, on the other hand, Kumaras who are seen as the human forms of Ganesha and Bhairava do not have to undergo any of these restrictions apart from taking part in a few festivals. Shakya writes:

> Unlike me, they live normal lives outside of festival times, attending school and staying with their families, the only concession to their divinity being that at meals they are always served first (Shakya, 2012: 45).

I look at it as a microcosm of what gender is believed to represent as a social construct that it penetrates into the system making the gender difference more pronounced. The body is sexed first and cultural inscription is imposed in such a manner that defying it would mark a person as the wrong doer and liable to be punished. The punishment can be looked as the marker to sustain a line between what is right and wrong. It is hence considered right for the Kumaras to live 'normal' lives and the normalcy of Kumari is relegated to the choreographed life that she lives. Butler writes, "The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene" (Butler, 1988:526). The cultural inscription has been reiterated for so long that Kumari would think her way of living is the only way and might not want to trade life with the Kumaras, even if given an opportunity to do so. Not because she might not want to live that way of life, but because her body and consciousness is shaped and governed within the solid boundary of social thinking and conventions. Butler believes that if the absolute characteristic of sex is contested, the difference between gender and sex might have been absent and sex would appear as constructed as gender is or may be one and the same thing (Butler, 1990:9-10). If we consider this view we would be facing towards a completely opposite direction of what gender is

doing to Kumari by establishing the biasness. It is the pre-imposed notion of anatomical facticity, idea of essentialism and biological determinism that Butler has been rejecting through her works. The concept of 'nature and natural' itself is a constructed and choreographed phenomenon that is often used to legitimate and conventionalize gender biasness in any form and shape. The very fact that it is made distorts its own claim of being natural and hence beyond question; the natural nature of the assigned gender is artificial in true sense of the term and subject to a massive breakdown if that grid of heterosexist framework is questioned and critiqued.

The next point that I would want to stress here is the worship of Kumari as the mother figure that not only demonstrates the contradiction with her pre-pubescent state and problematizes it further, it also engenders her role performance. Allen mentions that Kumari has displayed qualities of a highly ambiguous kind and writes:

> 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 (Allen, 2000:182).

Butler notes that gender asserts the materiality of body and shapes the body to a particular gender in order to assign a series of acts which are to be repeated, reiterated and materialized without fail (Butler, 1993:2). It is not the power of the speaker who pronounces a man and a woman as husband and wife, but it is the power of performative; the reiteration of citation of norms which exercises power in the true sense of the term. Gender exists as a performance otherwise it does not exist at all. It is the citation of heterosexual and phallocentric norms which gives a specific gender to a body and with that also comes a whole array of 'sedimented acts' (Butler, 1988:523). The act of mothering may be considered as one such act that has been designed to perform a gendered role. Kumari is not only always decked in red in her public appearances, even in the inside of her residence she does not use anything that is not red in color. Starting from her clothes, to bed sheets, to curtains, to towels, socks and even her toothbrush (Shakya, 2012:19). Allen notes that the red color she is associated with, hints at her virtual post-menstruation and married status, suggesting underlying maturity and sexuality (Allen, 1989:67-68). It is a constant reminder that her responsibility as Kumari is not limited to accepting red toys, coloring books and other playing items, but her own understanding of herself should go beyond that through the act of mothering. This might be one of the reasons why Kumari often looks very distinct from the children of her

age, be it through her appearance or through her performed acts and gestures. She skips her childhood to become what her anatomical facticity might not allow her to attain, for sure, but her psychological upbringing surely can. Rita Gross (1978) argues how the conceptualization of a Goddess would "limit the women to the feminine and reinforce female roles and stereotypes, and thus, be a confining rather than a liberating force" (p.274). This reinforcing strategy is evident in the idea of mother goddess which gets framed in the construct of mothering which is further referred to as a specified gendered role. It not only creates linguistic performative, through the utterance of gendered language, but also makes sure that those roles are performed accordingly and not restrained in any way. Gross suggests that the usage of masculine god-language should be avoided in order to avoid the current sexism that is present in theology and ritual (Ibid. 276). The danger of masculine god-language is double edged in the sense that it might belittle the status of Kumari to that of mother who already has a definite image in the social context. Despite being worshipped as a powerful goddess, her appearance as a benevolent mother might restrict the power symbols to a handful of residual acts only. On the other hand, there is a fear that the women who worship her may limit their understanding of mother goddess to a social zone, where their identification with the goddess is comfortable and within the conventional codes and hence regressive to a certain extent. Also the image of a powerful goddess would by no means suggest the same power and status shared by the women as well.[38] Then it would not be wrong to say that the patriarchal hierarchy is reinforced time and again with a simple yet effective political act of imposing the idea of mothering in the socio-religio-cultural arena.

I take a moment and look at Kumari from a perspective different to what has been the case. Other than her prepubescent and virgin girl's identity how would it be like to think of Kumari just as a prepubescent and a virgin ignoring the assigned sex and gender? If we do away with the established 'sex and gender' constructs and reconsider the selection process and the physical attribute, we would not come to a single characteristic that might suggest a definite sex or gender that a Kumari is supposed to possess, other than the linguistic determination of being called by the term 'Kumari'. Even though there is the requirement of small and well-recessed sexual organ, but nowhere does it mention any particular gendered organ as such. Obviously, the myth of Kumari and king does sound convincing than a myth filled with homosexual innuendos, but it raises a

[38] Michael Allen has observed that Kumari is worshipped as a manifestation of a mother goddess but the actual mothers in the Hindu society are not given a high status (Allen, 1990:10-11).

strong question as to why can we not look at it from this angle as well? I can very well imagine a prepubescent and a virgin boy playing the role of Kumari till he reaches the age of puberty, because he may not bleed, but he does go through puberty. The requirement of Kumari is not at all gendered, or something that only her physical features would be able to provide. It is very much the same as any boy of her age would have. In fact, the Kumaras during the festival wear a similar outfit like Kumari, only the difference being their dress is white and red in color. I have come across images of Kumaras which are incorrectly captioned as 'Kumari or Living Goddess'. Why I am inclined to bring this angle to my study is because there are times when Kumari is said to perform some acts that would question her well-designed gendered self altogether. For instance, Shakya notes that she used to 'master' the bathing ceremony of *Seto Machhendranath*, which is generally done by the male members of the community, where the deity's image is given a bath and decorated with 108 pieces of clothing (Shakya, 2012:57). A girl invited to watch a bath taking place might seem very unconventional and a shameful act in the context of Nepalese society. It might go to the extent of being termed unethical of making someone see an act as such. This act might seem troublesome if we consider the gender she has been attributed with. But because of her conferred identity as Kumari, the act of is validated. Butler argues that it is the distinction between genders that 'humanizes' individual and failing "to do their gender right are regularly punished" (Butler, 1988:522). However, in contrast to that, Kumari's presence is not criminalized and punished, but rather valorized and not projected any different from any other male present there. She is looked upon as a master whose gender identity is subverted for the duration of that event. There might be failure to do the gender right for the specific period as a socially constructed idea would demand, but that normalcy is also a social product that allows her to perform the role for the very moment. This also poses another question if Kumari, seen as a mother on one hand, can also defy her gendered role to take another role whose gender identity gets temporarily muted according to the need of the hour. It is the continuous evolving and liminal nature of Kumari that breaks the normalcy of a gendered identity making it difficult to fit into the heterosexual matrix and performing the right gender.

Gross points out that apart from the three Western monotheistic religions most of the world's known symbols that have included 'anthropomorphic symbolism' and have also given room to 'bisexual symbolism' in which the divine consists of feminine and masculine components (Gross, 1978:270-271). She refers to two images of the Shaivite tradition: the Shiva linga and the

Ardhanari icon (Gross, 1978: 279-280). She argues that yoni in the Shiva linga gets overlooked despite of the fact that the phallic component rests in the base of the 'stylized vagina' (Ibid.). On the other hand, the second image demonstrates the 'divine bisexuality' more prominently than the title itself (Ibid.). The presence of bisexual element in a deity can be seen as an extension of the very idea of bisexual identity of the human body itself. It cannot be seen as an uncommon trait in the belief system of Shaivism or even Hinduism, if we look at the myth of how Durga is supposed to be created out of the gods to slain Mahisasura, the buffalo demon (Ibid. 280). However, the intriguing character in case of Kumari who is also worshipped as Durga has a more complicated sex and gender constitution as she remains within the realm of Buddhism as a Bodhisattva. According to Sussane Mrozik (2006) a Bodhisattva is "a nascent Buddha, a being who has dedicated him-or herself to becoming a Buddha" (p.16). The unique feature of a Bodhisattva is that it does not conform to a male or female identity and is a fluid sexless embodiment. Mrozik prefers to call it non-normatively sexed, and its very structure gives a new dimension to Butler. Butler argues how a sex is prediscursive to form a gender and it is on the materiality that performance is designated to a body. Bodhisattva not only blurs the distinction between male and female, but also erases the existence of both. I am not comfortable to call this development of identity as genderless, because claiming that leaves the possibility of forming a gendered identity. The understanding of gender through the non-sexed body of Kumari opens many doors to relocate Kumari as something beyond the constructed idea of sex and gender. It actually defies the social understanding or imposition and creates another form of discourse that might have the potential to look at Kumari not within the designed frame of abiding gendered self, but as an alterior being, and non-gendered identity as a symbol of resistance to the heterosexual matrix that Butler has been fighting against.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter focuses on how gender is defined, how gender is performed and enacted and how gender gets effaced. It brings in the identity formation of Kumari which goes through the perception of perfection and how it gets manifested not only on the surface of Kumari's body, but

also the interior essence gets manufactured. It splits Kumari's identity and observes the performativity as it unfolds during various phases. It further opens up a discussion on the issue of unperforming puberty as a tool to subvert the very idea of gendered performance. It also argues that the performance of *Devi Pyakham* should be looked rather as impersonification of Kumari and not female impersonation endorsing the absence of femaleness. The last part of this chapter views the concept of gender from various angles and presents Kumari or the idea of being Kumari within the discourse. As the 'naturally' imposed social role changes, so does the realization of becoming another identity also gets created. Although the performance of one social actor gets over, but performance in itself remains fluid; in continuum, enhancing the deeply rooted gender norms through daily social and periodical performances practices.

CONCLUSION

Nepal is yet to recover from the loss it had suffered due to the terrible earthquake that occurred in 2015. To add more to its woes, the political situation is not doing any good either. The economic state has fallen apart and this has a huge impact on the working conditions of the citizens. I look at it as a rupture that will create a difference; for better or worse, only time can tell. It would not be wrong to say that Nepal is going through a challenging phase because of the political uprising for Madhesi rights and the Constitution making process. In a situation like this, it becomes crucial to understand how does one look at the underlying politics of Kumari worship and its impact on the people. The country as a whole requires a getaway to ease the agony and so does the political functionaries. Kumari worship provides a balance to both. In fact, it becomes more important to perform the public worship because that would not only create a new ground for political assertion, but the community's as well. The rupture needs to be taken care of; it requires reinforcing the same power-enhancing and identity reasserting approaches to continue the past in the present.

This dissertation started with an aim to throw open some crucial discussion questioning the idealization of religious tolerance, the patronization of ritual, the powerful status of Kumari and the constructed gender norms through the myriad performative aspect of the Kumari worship of Nepal. It attempted to question the idea of religious tolerance itself by depicting the notion of negotiation and contestation, and the power structure that was constructed on its basis. It is an initiative to demonstrate not only the performances during the worship, but the political performativity that emerged out of the worship, in order to carve out a sense of visibility of power through the presence and public appearances of Kumari. The dissertation has been able to minutely observe the small strands of power-demonstrating tactics culminating in a tussle to gain authority, control and consent.

It intended to bring Kumari closer to the domain of performativity which is a new perspective added to the works on Kumari. It attempted to look at a performing Kumari rather than an incarnation of a deity. While the various performative sides of Kumari is observed, there is also a conscious decision to study the possibility of gender dynamics through Kumari. The research has looked at how gender can be visualized, performed and recieved in terms of performance-be it through gendered performance or through imposition of gendered role. Adding to that, it also

attempted to look at the notion of non-genderedness through Kumari and what happens when her identity in terms of gender gets displaced or erased altogether. This research is experimental in the sense that it tried to see the public worship as a performance of politics and power and not as a divine act, it tried to subvert the notion of female impersonation to impersonification and it also questioned the performativity of gender to bring in the idea of an alterior identity.

There is no doubt that the study is an outcome of various works done in the past, but to a very large extent those works have become a point of departure. I acknowledge the limitation of this dissertation. The biggest limitation of this dissertation is that only the Kumari of Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Patan are studied in this research, there are several other Kumaris who could not be taken for study. I intend to explore some of the various areas in my PhD since there is a less scope of accommodating all the Kumaris of Nepal in this research project, besides the obstruction of accessibility and information. There have been questions which still need to be researched and come with broader discussion, for instance the place of this tradition in the contemporary period when more and more parents are unwilling to offer their daughters and want their children to be educated-empowered if not divine-empowered. There is an unsaid but felt fear amongst the community, where on one hand their traditions are getting more and more coverage, but on the other hand they have to pay with the price of newer traditions to cater to the taste of local and tourists alike.

The dissertation also could not bring in to discussion various aspects of Kumari worship that still needs to be taken up for further research. It could not discuss elaborately the performance of tourism or the impact of Kumari worship on tourism or vice versa, as the festivals mentioned in the study occur (co-incidentally or not) during the peak tourist season (April-September). The performative cultures around Kumari worship that have been briefly mentioned in the dissertation can be an interesting subject for research. For instance, the performances of Majipa Lakhey, the Aakash Bhairav, Navadurga dance and so on, which have been inserted to the festivals in the course of time. They do have the potential to bring in the idea of how some performative cultures remain, some get replaced while some intervene. There is also a necessity of deeper level of exploration to open a discussion on tantrism discourse in Kumari worship which has not been dealt broadly in the dissertation. If we closely observe the festivals discussed in the dissertation in the contemporary period, it becomes clearer that there is a sense of revival in the Newar community. The presence of Newari population in their traditional attire and regular parades in the festivals to

showcase their culture is not a mere co-incidence. It should be looked at as an attempt to reassert the Kumari cult and the street festivals to project it as their culture or bring them closer within the fold of the community. There is a strong sense of seeking an indigenous identity that cannot be equated or blended with the present mainstream Nepalese identity. And also the caste discourse is not taken as one of the core argument in the dissertation, but it has been discussed as one of the integral factor in various arguments. These are some of the many unexplored arenas that do have a great potential to generate discussion in my future research works.

This study has tried to refer to the recent earthquake that occurred in April, 2015 that shook Nepal and orphaned her of many historical symbols of the cities of Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Patan. The direct impact of this earthquake can have a lasting impression on the tourism of the Valley and an indirect one on the street festivals that has a lot to contribute to the economy of the country. In a time like this, it becomes crucial to see if Kumari worship will take a different route and disappear gradually or emerge out of the calamity unscathed as it has done in the past.

Many regimes have passed, the cult has been challenged in the Supreme Court and the President has replaced the King, but outside the *Kumari Chen*, you will still find people, eager to catch a glimpse of her, through her beautifully crafted wooden lattice window, awaiting her performance. Hence, it has withstood many unfortunate events, it has faced criticism from many corners, it has incorporated with the changing times, it has mystified the contours of mind and body, it has aroused curiosity and inhibition at the same time, and yet it has survived all of these and still preparing itself to face more of these with a calm demeanor and composed gestures, just like Kumari that we now know.

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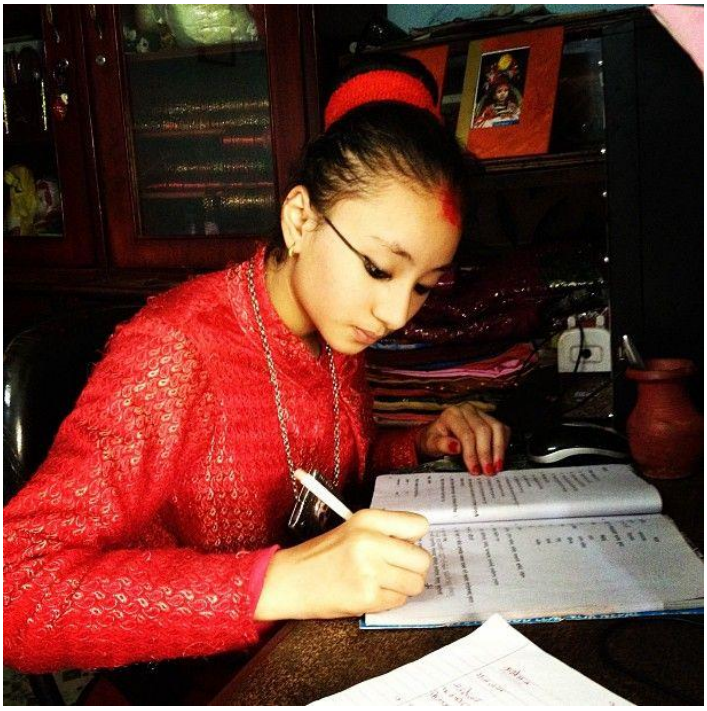

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