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Jui Shrestha

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WOMEN AT THE HELM

Pulling the chariot of the living goddess Kumari in Kathmandu

By Jui Shrestha '07

I was given the task of “whistle-blower.” My job was to be at the front of the procession, blow the whistle, and clear the way for the women coming through behind, mightily pulling the chariots. Only an hour before I was tracking down organizers to get a festival pass at the last minute. I was certainly not expecting to be given one of the spots that involved managing the procession.

But I was gripped by a mix of emotions. Nervous at the responsibility shouldered upon me, overwhelmed by the sea of people swarming around, excited about fulfilling a long-held dream, and grateful for the opportunity.

The procession was part of Yenyaa, the weeklong Kathmandu festival celebrated by the Newars, the oldest inhabitants of the Kathmandu valley, to commemorate their settlement here. Of the numerous activities associated with the festival, the

chariot procession of the living goddess Kumari and Lord Ganesh and Bhairab is arguably the main attraction. Yenyaa is one of the few times during the year that the Kumari leaves her residence for public appearances. Once a girl becomes Kumari she lives in the Kumari residence until a new Kumari is appointed, usually every five years. She leaves her residence for various festivals and appearances a dozen or so times a year.

This year was particularly special as we had four-year-old Trishna Shakya, the new Kumari, taken around in her first procession. In keeping with the melding of Hindu and Buddhist practices among Newars, the Kumari—who is the human form of the Hindu goddess Taleju—is a prepubescent girl from the Buddhist clan. The selection is mainly based on examination of the girl’s astrological charts.



Only very recently were women were allowed to pull the Kumari procession chariots. ... But still, challenges for female chariot pullers remain."

—Jui Shrestha

As Yenyaa is the only time when the Kumari's blessings can be taken outside of her residence, everyone comes out to seek them—from the Malla kings who started the festival, to the Shah kings who came after, and now the Nepali president. Over three days the procession covers the streets of old Kathmandu, allowing people to get her blessings from their homes.

It is always a vibrant scene, so much so that it inspired me to design an independent major at Colby—urban studies. On faraway Mayflower Hill, I found an opportunity to study my hometown closely, an invaluable experience to match my personal interest with Colby's academic offerings.

Not only did I get to study preservation projects aimed at safeguarding Kathmandu's heritage but also modern developments such as shopping malls that were coming up swiftly. One of the recurring themes in my classes: how well-designed cities provide the infrastructure and the opportunity for people to mingle in their streets. The Kumari procession continues to fit this mold.

I have participated in the event every year since moving back to Nepal from the U.S. in 2015. I came back from San Francisco after working in a public policy research organization when a similar opportunity came in Kathmandu. That year the festival was taking place in especially trying circumstances. Just a few months before, Nepal had been struck by a massive earthquake. Many monuments in Kathmandu's city core were destroyed. Houses along the route were supported by wooden struts making passage through the narrow alleys dangerous.

Much of that damage has been repaired. The restoration of the Gaddi Baithak, from where the president receives the Kumari's blessings, is complete. The Gaddi Baithak palace, built in 1908 and designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, has a large audience hall specifically built to receive foreign guests once Nepal began opening up to the world. The restoration of the palace was funded by the U.S. Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation.

Despite the obstacles, organizers have found ways to ensure the streets are safe for the procession. Both people who have lived in the old town center for generations and more recent migrants to the city are represented. Some see new additions to the festival, like youth bands playing traditional music and growth in corporate sponsorships, while others learn for the first time that there is a living goddess in Kathmandu.

Still, many houses that the procession passes continue to be on supports. But we no longer view them as barriers. They are, for now, added contours to the city center. Volunteers clear the way and warn the chariot pullers in time for us to make swift adjustments to navigate around the struts.

Women were allowed to pull the Kumari procession chariots only very recently. In 2012 the festival management committee made the change after a series of public consultations. But still, challenges for female chariot pullers remain.

Although Nepal has progressive laws around many women's issues like abortion and divorce, the everyday experiences of women are trying. As such, there were times during the procession when it felt like even a simple pleasure of being part of a festival peacefully was being denied to women.

Someone from the crowd constantly tugged at a chariot puller's hair at one of the customary stops. I was called a whore by someone who did not want to move from the procession's path. These slights felt especially jarring given the national mood on the status of women around this year's Yenyaa.

During such moments I had to remind myself of how as a child I used to yearn for a few extra minutes of viewing time after the chariots passed our window. As a teenager I invented reasons to take leave from boarding school to watch the Kumari procession. At Colby, it determined my course of study.

Perhaps there will always be an element of struggle related to this festival, but it still counts as success. The female volunteers, a group present even before women were allowed to pull chariots, have had more of a say in the festival's proceedings in recent years. It is a welcome sight to have a team of only policewomen give protection on this day. And the general excitement surrounding women taking the reins of the chariots has given a new direction to this age-old festival, components of which are threatened by budget cuts and lack of enthusiasm.

And my excitement? This was an event that I watched happily from the window as a child and through pictures as an adult living abroad. It is still unbelievable that I get to participate fully.