Thematizations of the Goddess in South Asian Cinema

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Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

ANWAY MUKHOPADHYAY
AND SHOUVIK NARAYAN HORE

The figure of the Goddess has often assumed a central position in the thematic spectrum of various genres of South Asian cinema. From genre to genre, and from one geo-cultural zone to another, her cinematic representations manifest different socio-political concerns, aesthetic styles and thematic treatments. While the mythological genre represents her mythic exploits, including narratives grounded in both Sanskritic and local/*sthalapuranic* traditions, "art films" often seek to thematize the Goddess in terms of the complex relations between gender and religion in South Asia. Thematically speaking, her functions, whether tropological or narrative, often overlap across film genres in the region. Hence, there is convergence as well as divergence between the thematizations of the Goddess in art films and those in popular mythological or devotional films. We need to remember that even the audience of the art films on the Goddess theme may often be grounded in devotional traditions, and may well be her devotees. Hence, even in terms of the reception of such films by the audience, we often see critical points of convergence as well as divergence, as far as the different film genres are concerned.

The Goddess, whether pan-South-Asian or local, Sanskritic or syncretic, remains a powerful presence in South Asian culture. However, while scholars keep dealing with South Asian goddess traditions from the perspective of religious studies, seldom do we pay sufficient attention to the presence – whether solid or spectral – of these living goddess traditions in the domain of cultural production in South Asia. Mandakranta Bose has reminded us of the necessity to "widen the view of goddesses in Hinduism beyond theology and ritual practice to situate them in the human world of their times" (14). This volume, we hope, will facilitate such a project. The Goddess in South Asia remains a conundrum for many – she has co-optable as well as subversive potential, as far as her location within the South Asian patriarchies is concerned. She may sometimes facilitate and sometimes baffle feminist projects. However, the complex imaginaries of the

"feminine" offered by the South Asian goddess traditions are often misinterpreted when the interpreter forgets that they are also equally complex imaginaries of the "divine". In other words, the Goddess is not just woman deified – not just divine feminine; she is also the feminine divine. Within a secular framework of interpretation, this distinction may appear to be superfluous or even baffling, but it remains significant in decoding the tropological functions of Devi in the everydayness of South Asian cultural life. However, it is always easy to rob the Goddess of her divinity and emphasize, exclusively, her femininity. Her male devotees may do this; the cultural analyst may do this; the secular filmmaker may also do this. Nevertheless, it becomes apparent from the wide array of South Asian films discussed in this volume that the presence of the Goddess in the thematic frameworks of South Asian cinema involves complex and divergent figurations. In art house film, she is sometimes juxtaposed against flesh and blood women, a juxtaposition involving an ironical treatment of the gap between goddesses and women in a patriarchal society; at other times, she is brought closer to the flesh and blood women – that is, *made fleshly*, thereby presenting a woman as the Goddess in corporeal form or one (really or symbolically) possessed by the female divinity. In popular films dealing with the teratology of the Goddess, the Goddess sometimes assumes human flesh and becomes a woman; at other times, the human female is endowed with mystic or magical divine attributes (especially in times of crisis). All these tropes and motifs vary geographically, but they remain comparable. A comparative analysis of such cultural phenomena helps us in understanding the deep presence of the Goddess in various segments of South Asian culture – in India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. While the role of the divine feminine in South Asian culture has often been explored, seldom have scholars paid attention to the possibility of bringing together gender studies, religious studies and cultural studies in a cultural analysis of the multi-hued thematizations of the Goddess in South Asian cinema. The present volume explores the thematizations of the Goddess in popular devotional films, art films, and even documentary films, across different regions of India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The contributors, using multiple analytical tools and interpretative methods, underscore the thematic, stylistic and political complexities involved in the representations of the Goddess in South Asian feature and documentary films. However, they do not merely offer interpretations of the Goddess's representations on celluloid, but rather explore the deeper thematic significance of the Goddess in such films with reference to issues as diverse as gender, justice, the sublime, the uncanny, and the forgotten freedom fighters of South Asia.

In the contemporary creative sphere of South Asia, we often find the Goddess positioned in the midst of a constellation of diverse themes, and she inspires complex reconstellations of traditional themes prevalent in South Asian literary and performative cultures. In this context, South Asian films are no exception. We need to remember that the Goddess is not frozen in dead myths in South Asia; she is part of *living* cultures. Hence, the crises, contradictions, conversations and confrontations in which she engages or which she triggers are an integral part of the contemporary social, political and cultural life in South Asia. The dialogues between tradition and modernity, in the case of goddess cultures, foster new understandings of gender roles and gender tropes. In fact, the interesting point is that the Goddess in South Asian cinema is actually poised between the *gendered past* and *gendered present* of this region and occasions multi-layered dialogues between them. However, such cultural products, we must remember, are not just specimens of tradition revisited through the modernist lens, but rather include – often intricately – dialogic friction between colonial modernity and the "modernity of tradition" (Rudolph and Rudolph, 3-14). Such points of friction, foregrounded by the Goddess-themed South Asian films, assume a deeper significance when we remember that, "like all abstractions, Hindu goddesses resist simple explanations and demand constant scrutiny" (Bose, 14).

As Mukhopadhyay has insisted elsewhere, it is necessary to explore "how, in Gadamerian terms ... our horizon and the Goddess's horizon may be dialogized" (4). In other words, the Goddess should not be, and cannot be stacked away in the mythological domain; we must speak and listen to her. Cinema, it goes without saying, is one of the most potent and effective mediums for facilitating such creative interactions between the Goddess and the contemporary South Asian subject. As Bose reminds us, the Goddess is conceived as both the One and the Many: "the presence of the goddess as the One and the Many is always felt in the everyday life of Hindus, informing their speculative philosophy as much as their social relations, personal and public conduct, and political positions" (14). The films discussed in this volume point toward the complex articulations of the Goddess as the One and the Many, involving the centripetal force exerted by the figuration of the Mahadevi/Great Goddess and the centrifugal force released by the multiplicity of goddess-forms and goddess-functions which are often homologous with the figurations and functions of human females on celluloid as well. However, this multiplicity becomes all the more relevant and meaningful in the context of the religious plurality of South Asia. The cinematic representations of the Goddess are not viewed by an exclusively Hindu audience. The audience would obviously include

members of various other religious communities in South Asia, and also secular viewers who might be atheists as well. The power of these films lies in the fact that they provide a larger and more inclusive critical framework for understanding the Goddess's symbolic functions in South Asian culture today, in terms of the ontologies and epistemologies of gender prevalent in contemporary Nepal, India, Bangladesh or Sri Lanka. It is this plurality of the processes of understanding and engaging with Devi which is reflected and celebrated in this volume.

Elaborating on the worship of the Goddess Durga in Nepal and parts of South-East Asia, Dhruba Karki in Chapter 1 illustrates how *Kumari Puja* plays a pivotal role in Dharmic syncretism, allowing mutual peace across mythical and theological lines. In Chapter 2, Prabal Bhowmik's Lacanian reading of the Bangladeshi film *Debi: Misir Ali Prothombar* situates the female protagonist in the *terra nullius* of patriarchal discourse where she becomes the "incomprehensible other", in the words of the author. Referring to a 2017 documentary on Sharda Pith, a dilapidated goddess site in Pakistani-occupied-Kashmir, Srijani Chowdhury, in Chapter 3, assesses the theo-political history of the Goddess, ruptured across two nations. This is followed by Ritushree Sengupta's re-definition, in Chapter 4, of humour as effective ammunition against avaricious and immoral behaviour in *Mookuthi Amman*, a popular Tamil movie. Balagopal S. Menon, in Chapter 5, insists that *Sexy Durga*, the controversial Malayalam film, re-iterates the need for multidimensional categories before the readers can truly access the intersubjective sphere of polyphonic meanings. One of the methods of promoting this should ideally involve the dissociation of women from delayed, or denied justice under patriarchal dominion by arming the female body as an absolute, counter-discursive machinery, as Neha Chatterjee establishes in her essay on the Bengali film, *Devipaksha* (which constitutes Chapter 6). As Raja Basu demonstrates through his reading of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Earth 1947* in Chapter 7, momentous historical events may divinize the dislocated female whose masculinization creates a gender paradox, eliciting admiration-admixed love. In Chapter 8, Takbeer Salati offers a semiotic analysis of the Bollywood film, *Kahaani*, the female protagonist of which engages in a process of equivocal meaning-making, emphasizing the dynamic agency/urgency of urban hermeneutics. Ankita Sundriyal, in Chapter 9, efficiently undertakes a detailed study of *Raj Jat*, a Hindi documentary where local communities are morally and theologically governed by the mountain Goddess, Nanda Devi, through ritualistic enterprises. This study obviously resonates with Karki's take on the Goddess Durga in Nepal. Praggnaparamita Biswas's critique of the Hindi film *Chingaari* in Chapter 10 reveals the gap between patriarchal Goddess

worship and thealogy, where an empowered man's privileged caste and class positions and his oppressive interpretation of spiritual cultures automatically annihilate the Goddess's ideological valuation, rendered irretrievable until the demi-god's death signals the restoration of the (feminine) Absolute. Different facets of *Tumbaad*, another movie in the Hindi gothic genre, have been put into perspective vis-à-vis Jungian discourse by Dipannita Chatterjee and Gourab Singha in Chapter 11, through the reinforcement of archetypes. This is followed by Utkarsh Chaubey's discussion, in Chapter 12, of the establishment of a Shakti Pith dedicated to Maa Tarkulha Devi near the historic site of the infamous 'Chauri-Chaura' incident, where the author explores how devotion and martyrdom interpenetrate in a Bhojpuri film. In Chapter 13, Adity Roy's exploration of the rewriting of Sita in *Subarnarekha* and *Pinjar* foregrounds Ritwik Ghatak's and Chandraprakash Dwivedi's obsession with the post-Partition modalities of the feminine, drawing parallels between cinematic action and divine pre-destination. Psycho-physical violence on women in Satyajit Ray's *Devi*, from 1960, and Anvita Dutt's *Bulbbul*, released on Netflix in 2020, forms the central contention of Chapter 14. Authored by Jaya Sarkar, the chapter explores how both benevolent and malevolent aspects of the Goddess Kali resurface time and again as visual rhetoric. Dipanwita Paul, in her efficient critique of the horror-film genre in Chapter 15, also examines *Bulbbul*, amongst other important movies, underscoring the political potential of the world of Netflix where digital activism receives its important share of space. In Chapter 16, Sreejit Datta and Ahana Chaudhuri present a fine comparative study of the thematizations of Devi in Satyajit Ray's *Devi* and the popular Bengali film *Marutirtha Hinglaj*, directed by Bikash Roy, from an Indic emic perspective. Nabanita Paul and Abhishek Chowdhury, in Chapter 17, closely read the mythopoeic elements of the Bengali film, *Kaaler Rakhal.* In Chapter 18, Monisha Mohan and Gigi J. Alex deal with the thematizations of the Goddess Bhadrakali in Malayalam cinema. In Chapter 19, Sreenu Gopan offers a *rasa*-oriented reading of the Sinhalese movie *Vaishnavee*, critically reflecting on the emotive approaches to the divine feminine. Shouvik Narayan Hore, in the last chapter, offers a summary of *sakama* and *nishkama* Bhakti in *Maa Durga Divya Haathi*, a Tamil film, and two Bengali films, *Sadhak Ramprasad* and *Sri Ramakrishna*, where dialectized Bhakti re-arranges the theological realm for the Sublime.

The trajectory of our patiently articulated volume, then, thematizes the itinerary of the South Asian Mother Goddess from *thea-cide* to the *thea-logos*, from idolatry to ideology, from superstition to the Sublime, and from the alphabet of the particulars to the absolute utterance. The accomplishment of

this objective marks the fruition of a resilient project that called for the utmost dedication and sincerest engagement.

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CHAPTER ONE

A TRAJECTORY OF THE HERO AND GODDESS IN SOUTH ASIAN CINEMA: THE MYTH OF KUMARI FROM STAGE TO SCREEN

DHRUBA KARKI

The Goddess Kumari in Kathmandu: Blending Myth and History

After the Gorkha Conquest in 1769, King Prithvi Narayan Shah received a *tika*[1] from Kumari of Durbar Square in Kathmandu. The tradition of the reigning king's worship of the Goddess Kumari of the Buddhist Newar with reverence continued during the Shah dynasty until its fall in 2008. In the republican political set-up, presidents have carried this practice over, taking blessings from the Taleju-Goddess Kumari. The last king of Kantipur, present-day Kathmandu, Jayaprakash Malla (1736–46) initiated selecting a Kumari, a virgin from the Shakya clan within whom Taleju would reside, to keep his promise he once made to the goddess. Even after the political changes in Nepal, the cult of Kumari as an incarnate representative of the Goddess Durga, from the Shakya and the Bajracharya ancestry, continues with an equal level of belief. The documentary *Living Child Goddess* (BBC, 2018) contains a visual spectacle of the trajectory of the hero and goddess in the spiritual voyage of Kumari from stage to screen, reinforcing a perfect amalgam of Buddhism and Hinduism in the Newari culture of South Asia. Moreover, the visual spectacle of Kumari and Durga from stage to screen reworks a transformation of the archetypal female energy from the divine to the human, the celestial to the terrestrial, and myth to history.

The Bajracharya girl in Patan and Bhaktapur and the Shakya girl in Kathmandu are selected for the Living Goddess Kumari. The Shah kings

followed the Malla kings through the ritual of Kumari worship. Later, presidents in the republican set-up in recent decades have remained patrons of the Kumari cult in Kathmandu. Presidents receive a *tika* with a blessing from the Kumari, a ritual of continuity and transformation in the Hindu-Buddhist culture. In that sense, the Hindu king's respect for the Buddhist girl embodies social cohesion and cultural harmony in Nepal after the unification of small states in the mid-eighteenth century. Despite political changes over two and a half centuries, the cult of Kumari worship persists under the custody of the Newars in the Kathmandu Valley. At sunrise on one special day, a little Newar girl, dressed in red and bedecked in precious jewels, embarks on her spiritual journey from her parental home to the Kumari Chhen (house) without touching the ground. Kumari is taken out to the public space on certain occasions when the rulers and the public visit for boon and blessing.

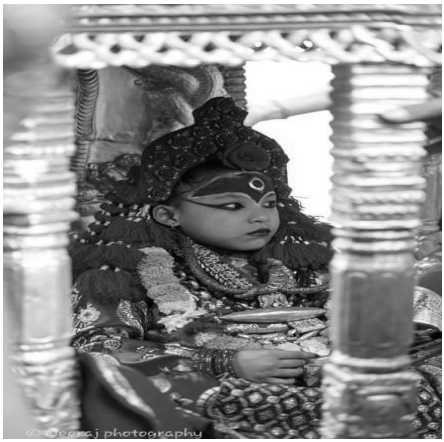

Figure 1.1. Kumari in Kumari Chhen of Basantapur Durbar Square (Source: Neeraj Maharjan's private collection)

In *A History of Nepal*, John Whelpton recounts the Gorkha King's accession to the Valley kingdoms. Whelpton further adds that Prithvi Narayan Shah with his military capability and strong determination of a statesman had finally completed his unification campaign, after his conquest of the three valley states, Bhaktapur, Lalitpur and Kathmandu, in 1769 (35). In that way, people's use of Kathmandu for the Kathmandu Valley or Nepal Mandala for Nepal signifies a relational embodiment of the land and people in the valley. Also, people use "Nepal Mandala" for Nepal, a term

previously in practice to refer to the Kathmandu Valley before the advent of the Gorkhas.

Geometrically, the circular structure of the mandala in Buddhist temples interconnects the *yantric*[2] and *tantric*[3] – both mechanical and magical devices in the Buddhist and Hindu doctrinal dimensions of Eastern metaphysics. In *The Living Goddess*, Isabella Tree reinforces an integration of the body and spirit through the circular *mandalic*[4] image:

> The multidimensional nature of the mandala, and the way it resonates in the Newar mind on many different levels at once, is reflected in Newar architecture. Everywhere in the Kathmandu Valley, temples, stupas, *bahhals*[5] and votive chaityas, water fountains and public building tanks—and the Kumari Chen itself—have been built as mandalas. Like the mandalas in paintings, these constructions are geometrically perfect, usually square, with entrances in the four-directions. Doorways, garlanded and surmounted by elaborate *toranas*[6], correspond with the bejeweled entrances leading into the divine place on painted mandalas[7]. Carved moldings and cornices running around the walls of a building or the rim of a bathing tank denote the protective *raksha chakras*[8], a circular device to protect the body.
>
> The center of the mandala, where the principal deity resides, is key. In Buddhist *bahals*, it is usually pinpointed by a chaitya in the middle of the courtyard, representing Swayambhu, while in Hindu courtyards it is commonly a Shiva Linga. In artificial ponds and bathing tanks—like Nag Pokhari, next to Narayanhiti Palace—the mandala center point is marked by a golden snake's head, the king of the Nagas, rising through the water.
>
> All Newars—even regular householders and non-initiates—are aware of these mandalas as they go about their daily life. Even if, as lay people, they remain largely ignorant of the esoteric visualizations and meditations practised by the tantric adepts, they nonetheless rely on the religious professionals to activate the mandalas' powers on their behalf. Regular tantric worship of mandalas is believed not only to empower the practitioner but to bestow blessings and protection on the wider community, generating a state of happiness and prosperity on all the people who live in or use them. (169)

Geometric structures of squares and circles in painting and architecture resonate with the Newa aesthetics. The archetype of the Buddhist mandala with the circle within the square, and the square within circle symbolizes perfection and harmony in art and life. A similar circular structure can be seen in the labyrinth of the medieval Gothic cathedral. Such similar images and structures magnify shared belief systems, mythic structures, and cosmic union. Several squares and *bahals* present multiple circles and squares in the architectural space of the Durbar Squares in the Kathmandu Valley. The

English version of *durbar* is palace, and the Valley has three major palace squares, one each in the cities of Patan, Bhaktapur and Kathmandu.

György Dóczi illustrates aesthetics of proportional harmonies in art and nature. Geometric structures of circles and squares in the visual spectacle of art and architecture are based on proportion and harmonies in nature. Further, Dóczi finds proportion and balance in the structure of the human body and those of arts and natural phenomena:

> The relatedness of the human body to the circle and the square rests upon the archetypal idea of "squaring the circle," which fascinated the ancients, because these shapes were considered perfect and even sacred, the circle having been looked upon as a symbol of the heavenly orbits, the square as a representation of the "foursquare" firmness of the earth. The two combined in the human body suggests in the language of symbolic patterns that we unite within ourselves the diversities of heaven and earth, an idea shared by many mythologies and religions. (93)

Such proportionate harmony in the palace square corresponds to the rites of passage in the Kumari's mythic journey. From her innocence of child goddess to the experience of womanhood, she undergoes a process of transformation of consciousness. She experiences flashes of revelation in her initiation as Kumari as well as her coming-of-age with her first menstruation. From the Basantapur palace to the procession in the chariot across the city, the Shakya girl exposes a blend of the sacred and profane, and the spiritual with the political/historical.

South Asia embarks upon the path towards world peace through the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama of Lumbini and Kumari of Kathmandu. Buddha and Kumari symbolize structural congruence and social cohesion amidst cultural diversity in the region. For both of these reasons, Nepal has been a unique cultural space for the assimilation of people with different faiths, political backgrounds, and of different social classes, a process sought via shared values of love for humanity through the hero quest and spiritual voyage. Whether with King Birendra Bikram Shah's proposition of the Zone of Peace in Nepal, Mahatma Gandhi's movement of *ahimsa* (non-violence) in India, Martin Luther King Jr's peaceful rally for civil rights in the US, or Nelson Mandela's resilient perspective towards social integration in South Africa, corresponding inspiration from Siddhartha Gautama and the Newar Kumari is exceptionally unique. Individuals worship Kumari for blessings for success, progress and prosperity in the family and community, and leaders worship Kumari for order and prosperity in the country. Kumari resides in the Kumari Chhen – *Ghar* in

Nepali and house in English – under the cautious supervision of her parents and members of the clan until her pubescence before reigning in the Nepal Mandala.

The Goddess Kumari: Myth and Archetype

The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines "archetype" as "the most typical or perfect example of a particular kind of person or thing" (65). In Greek and Latin, the prefix "arch" means root, primitive, or primordial, and type implies form or model. Moreover, its adjective, archetypal implies "something or someone with important qualities that make somebody or something a typical example of a particular kind of person or thing" (66). In this paper, the Kumari Goddess is an archetypal figure of all deities and gods. Christopher Fee and David Leeming, in *The Goddess: Myths of the Great*, unfold the mythic resonance of the Goddess Durga who is also worshipped as Kali in South Asia. Durga in the Vedic philosophy is an archetypal goddess who appears in the battle between gods and demons. The female deity in the Indus Valley is a manifestation of Durga; Kali embodies the creative energy, power and terror, and creation and destruction (8). Also known as Shakti in the Nepali and Indian languages, Durga challenges demons who threaten the balance between creation and destruction (9). Moreover, Durga's slaughter of demons, including Mahisashura, on the battlefield is taken for creative destruction, an incident that leads toward peace and harmony.

Myths are invented from archetypes. We have myths of heroes, of love, quests, and journeys, among others. They stem from innate human impulses which we inherit genetically from our ancestors and birds and animals. Myths come from archetypes, and the former appear and reappear in different forms of narratives, including oral and written, and visual and non-visual. J. A. Cuddon, in *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, considers an archetype as:

> A basic model from which copies are made; therefore a prototype. In general terms, the abstract idea of a class of things which represents the most typical and essential characteristics shared by the class; thus a paradigm or exemplar. An archetype is atavistic and universal, the product of "the collective unconscious" and inherited from our ancestors. The fundamental facts of human existence are archetypal: birth, growing up, love, family and tribal life, dying death, not to mention the struggle between children and parents, and fraternal rivalry. Certain character or personality types have become established as more or less archetypal. For instance: the rebel, the

> Don Juan (womanizer), the all-conquering hero, the braggadocio (q.v.), the country bumpkin, the local lad who makes good, the self-made man, the hunted man, the siren, the witch and *femme fatale*, the villain, the traitor, the snob and the social climber, the guilt-ridden figure in search of expiation, the damsel in distress, and the person more sinned against than sinning. Creatures, also, have come to be archetypal emblems. For example, the lion, the eagle, the snake, the hare and the tortoise. Further archetypes are the rose, the paradisal garden and the state of "pre-Fall" innocence. Themes include the arduous quest or search, the pursuit of vengeance, the overcoming of difficult tasks, the descent into the underworld, symbolic fertility rites and redemptive rituals.
>
> The archetypal idea has always been present and diffused in human consciousness. Plato was the first philosopher to elaborate the concept of archetypal or ideal forms (Beauty, Truth, Goodness) and divine archetypes. (58)

As an innate characteristic, an archetype is something acquired without formal training. The Platonic archetype as an ideal of beauty, truth, justice, and goodness is shared by all humans in all times and cultures.

An archetype of the goddess forms the myth of Kumari on stage and screen, and in print and visual culture. Hindus and Buddhists in South Asia celebrate Vijaya Dashami as Durga Puja, worshipping the Goddess Durga, and taking a *tika* from elders on the tenth day of autumn. The fifteen-day festival begins with *Ghatasthapana* and ends with *Kojagrat Purnima* with fanfare. Hindus and Buddhists worship Durga for nine days, and they celebrate the gods' conquest of demons with the divinity of Durga on the tenth day. During Durga Puja, people in South Asia and beyond exchange greetings and felicitations with materials, images and icons of Durga slaying Mahisashura, the demon king.

At one point in *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, Heinrich Zimmer makes an analogy of Durga and Kali, and Sati and Parvati. In the eastern Vedic tradition, Parvati embodies Durga, and the latter reappears in multiple female forms. Connected to Parvati is Lord Shiva with an innermost supernatural luminosity to see a vision of Charm Irresistible (141). In South Asia, the image of Kali integrates the human and divine, and profane and sacred. Hindus and Buddhists worship Kali for bliss and fortune, and the female deity is associated with the Kumari Goddess in the Kathmandu Valley.

Kathmandu is famous for its rich cultural heritage. Temples with shrines and statues of gods and goddesses have made the capital city magnificent

for tourists and pilgrims from around the world. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has listed Kathmandu Valley, Lumbini, Chitwan National Park, and Sagarmatha National Park as world heritage sites. The Goddess Kumari in the Kathmandu Valley is one of the spectacular points of attraction for many of the visitors and tourists. At this point, I cite a relevant remark from Heinrich Zimmer's *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*:

> The perfect serenity and timeless harmony of the couple [Shiva and Parvati] is emphasized in this relief by their response to an attempt of a demon to shake their Olympus from below. The villain of this piece is Ravana, who in the Ramayana appears as the antagonist of Rama; as a great foe of the godly powers, he has been imprisoned in the netherworld and is held down by the towering weight of Shiva's mountain. Here he is shown suddenly trying to break free. He is shaking the mountain and the quivering has been felt. The goddess in a graceful, semi-recumbent posture, turns to Shiva, as if in a sudden access of fear, and grasps his arm. But the great god remains unmoved and by calmly pressing down his foot holds all secure. In spite of Parvati's lively gesture of anxiety, an atmosphere of safety prevails, not to be disturbed by the world-shaking demon who rocks the universe with his twenty arms. As evidence of the character of the divine couple we have here not the dramatic triumph of the godly principle through a hero-manifestation in one of the vivid, ever-recurrent battles of the cosmogonic round, but an undramatic, almost anti-dramatic, vision of their unconquerable grandeur. They are beyond every earthly assault—beyond even the superhuman-demonic—absolutely secure. This is an eighth century work from the Kailasanitha Temple at Ehiri. (197–8)

From psychic energies of archetypes shared among *homo sapiens*, there come myths, dreams and artworks. Folklore and fiction reproduce archetypal characters and their actions in different settings, historical and spatial.

Humans share inherent impulses, such as an urge to move, instinct to love, and potential to create art inherited from their ancestors and childhood days. For instance, dancing is the bodily movement that a baby initiates in the mother's womb and continues after birth. That is why movement is an inherent impulse that humans share with birds and animals. Moreover, people in all times and cultures have expressed their feelings and thoughts through their body's movements.

Indeed, characters and actions in popular media, such as those in cinema and on television, are basically archetypal. Carl Gustav Jung, in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, asserts that "archetypes are

composed of primordial and archaic images that humans share with others, including ancestors, birds and animals. Such common unconscious contents of conscious representations manifest differently in individuals across cultures" (5–6). Archetypal characters like the hero and the villain, and God and demon unravel those distinctively typical actions and behaviors. Creative forces in the inner psychic domain, archetypes remain in a deeper level of the psyche, somewhere between individual consciousness and the collective unconscious. In the Kumari cult, Durga Bhavani is an archetype of Taleju Bhavani, and the latter is the archetypal projection of Durga or Kali. Taleju-Kumari embodies the goddess archetype, and imagery of the demon—Mahishasura—reveals the demon archetype.

In the Jungian analysis of archetypes, archetypal characters include the hero, God, goddess, demon, mother, and child, among others. In that sense, an individual possesses the inherent character of the hero-type, the child-type, the mother-type, and the father-type. This 'type' is original, primal, and primordial, which Eric Partridge, in his *Origin: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*, characterizes as a 'pattern, prototype, model, or symbol' (3604). Based on the same primordial archetypal space, Joseph Campbell reinvents the hero and God, the father quest and transformation of consciousness. Citing the Jungian archetype, Campbell, in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, exposes the psychic energy shared by the hero, God and Goddess:

> This is the process known to Hindu and Buddhist philosophy as *viveka*, "discrimination." The archetypes to be discovered and assimilated are precisely those that have inspired, throughout the annals of human culture, the basic images of ritual, mythology, and vision. These "Eternal Ones of the Dream" are not to be confused with the personally modified symbolic figures that appear in nightmare and madness to the still tormented individual. Dream is the personalized myth, and myth the depersonalized dream; both myth and dream are symbolic in the same general way of the dynamics of the psyche. But in the dream the forms are quirked by the peculiar troubles of the dreamer, whereas in myth the problems and solutions shown are directly valid for all mankind. (18–19)

Kumari represents the Goddess Taleju, and the latter embodies the Goddess Durga. In that belief, the Goddess Kumari is brought to the king and people, integrating the sacred and profane, the divine and the human.

Myths, such as those of the Greeks and Romans, are also stories of the past. To me, both myth and history are narratives: the former is immersed in magic and mystery, and the latter in real events and records. Mark

Schorer, in *William Blake: Politics of Vision*, draws an analogy of inner meanings of life with that of the universe. For Schorer, myths are narratives of cosmic experiences and blend the diametrical opposites: past and present, matter and spirit, and human and non-human. In Schorer's thought, men of all times and cultures, with their profound artistic sensibilities, unravel innate bonds of individual with the collective, sacred with profane, and natural with supernatural (29). Myths explicate underlying universal structures in belief systems of people of different ethnic origins and varied cultural backgrounds of life and art.

Schorer elaborates myth as "fundamental, the dramatic representation of our deepest instinctual life, of a primary awareness of man in the universe, capable of many configurations, upon which all particular opinions and attitudes depend" (29). In narratives of *The Mahabharata*, major characters are correlated with specific strengths: Krishna with exceptional intelligence, Arjuna with the relentless determination to act, Karna with loyalty, Ram with obedience, and Seeta with the ideal in mythologies in the east. Similarly, in the Greco–Roman mythologies, Narcissus embodies self-love, the Odyssey stands for the heroic journey, Achilles represents innate weakness in humans, and Helen connotes beauty and grace. At the same time, there are equivalents and analogies in the myths of the West and the non–West. The Trojan War of the Greek Ulysses resembles the Lankan War in The Ramayana in the epic tradition in the East.

At the same time, there are shared structures in narratives of the West and the East. For example, Helen's beauty in the Greek myth parallels Seeta as the ideal in the eastern myth, with both figures concerning aesthetics of embodiments of the female body. The Trojan War results from Paris's abduction of Helen: Seeta's abduction leads to the Lankan War. In other words, Ravana abducts Seeta in *The Ramayana* while Paris kidnaps Helen in Homer's *Iliad.* Likewise, Hector's heroic actions parallel Arjuna's excellence in archery in the battle of Kurukshetra in *The Mahabharata*.

Like Kumari, the figure of Durga is navigated with reverence on stage to screen from Hindus and Buddhists alike, from Kathmandu to Kolkata, and from Sikkim to Kashmir – a trans-Himalayan mythic journey. In the myth of Durga, the female deity within the mortal male empowers him to accomplish extraordinary tasks in the service of mankind. Similarly, Ram defeats Ravana only after his creative energy is revitalized with the divine power of Durga. In Kathmandu, gods and goddesses fill the architectural space. A young girl of the Shakya clan or the Bajracharya of the Newar ethnic community is chosen for Kumari. During the Durga Puja in Kolkata

and Sikkim, the Goddess Durga receives profound veneration within her space, from the sacred site of the temple to the corporeal sphere of home and court. Precisely, the goddess worship cult in South Asia persists with an integration of the divinity and humanity.

With her nine forms—Shailaputri, Brahmacharini, Chandraghanta, Kushmanda, Skandamata, Katyayani, Kaalratri, Mahagauri, and Siddhidatri—Durga has multiple incarnations: Kali, Bhagavati, Bhavani, Ambika, Lalita, Gauri, Kandalini, Java, Meenakshi and Kamakshi. Also known as Mahamaya, the Great Mother of the universe, Durga with her ten hands is credited with her roles of maintaining creation, preservation and destruction. In an analogy of creation of positive energy and the destruction of evil forces, Durga connects the divine and the human. Durga, on her mount of a lion, slays Mahishasura to restore peace and order. Kumari projects power and it is her mission to serve communities. In *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, Zimmer describes Durga as the black deity:

> It might be said that the Goddess represents clearly enough by her feminine nature the life-bearing, life-nourishing, maternal principle; this, her positive aspect, hardly needs to be further emphasized. But the counter-balancing, negative aspect, her ever destructive function, which takes back and swallows again the creatures brought forth, requires a shock of vivid horror, if it is to be duly expressed. To this end she is represented as Kali, the Black One. Kali: that is the feminine form of the word kala, meaning "Time"—Time, the all-producing, all-annihilating principle, in the on flow of which everything that comes into existence again vanishes after the expiration of the brief spell of its allotted life. (211)

It is believed that the king or prime minister can successfully rule the state only with the blessing of Kumari. Following this belief system, King Prithvi Narayan Shah bowed to Kumari, a rite of passage to assimilate in the urban Newari culture. The Founder King was inclined to promote cultural diversity under one Nepali nation-state at the juncture of the transfer of power from the Malla to the Shah dynasty, which amplified an integration of the sacred and the secular.

In "A House for the Living Goddess: On the Dual Identity of the Kumari Chen in Kathmandu," Isabella Tree describes the architectural space of Kumari in the Hindu-Buddhist Nepali community:

> The architectural layout of the Kumari Chen with its large public puja room strongly suggests that Jaya Prakasha Malla's prime intention in creating the new Kumari Chen was to broaden the appeal of the royal Kumari, to make her more accessible to the citizens at large, setting her up as the city's central goddess, and, in a spirit of all-embracing Kumari bhakti, involve his subjects in his fervent attempts to propitiate her and secure the protection of Kathmandu. It appears it was at this juncture, too, that the selection pool for the royal Kumari was broadened from the *sangha* of Sikhanmu Bahal alone to the *sanghas* of the eighteen *mahaviharas* of Kathmandu. (167)

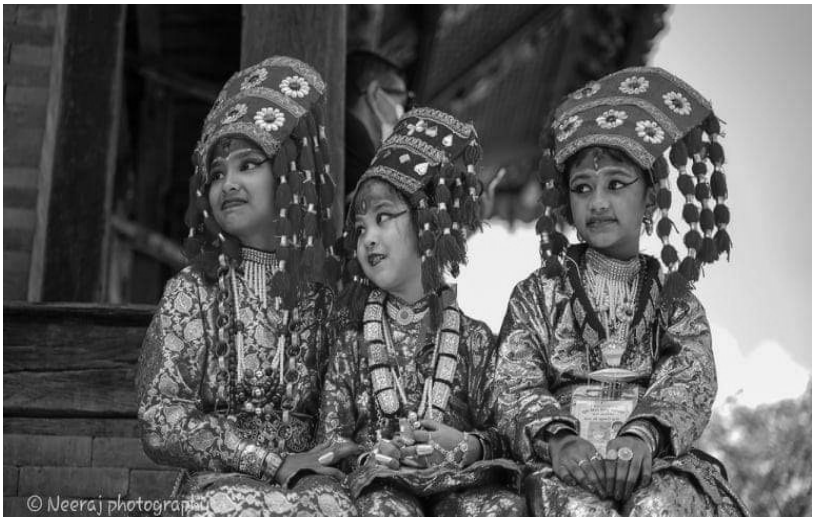

Figure 1.2. Local girls posing in Kumari attire in Basantapur Durbar Square (Source: Neeraj Maharjan's collection)

After the Gorkha Conquest of Nepal Mandala, the Shah king respected the Malla tradition of Kumari worship. His approval of the Buddhist Newari tradition marks the advent of modern Nepal.

Kumari as Embodiment of Peace and Harmony

Kumari emblematizes unity in diversity. In Nepal, people from varied cultures worship Kumari in her representations on stage and screen. Kumari becomes a visual spectacle for spectators from rural and urban spaces, the Newar and non-Newar communities. Clifford Geertz's proposition of culture corresponds to the Kumari cult:

> Our ideas, our values, our acts, even our emotions, are, like our nervous system itself, cultural products—products manufactured, indeed, out of tendencies, capacities, and dispositions with which we were born, but manufactured nonetheless. Chartres is made of stone and glass. But it is not just stone and glass; it is a cathedral, and not only a cathedral, but a particular cathedral built at a particular time by certain members of a particular society. To understand what it means, to perceive it for what it is, you need to know rather more than the generic properties of stone and glass and rather more than what is common to all cathedrals. You need to understand also—and, in my opinion, most critically—the specific concepts of the relations among God, man, and architecture that, since they have governed its creation, it consequently embodies. It is no different with men: they, too, every last one of them, are cultural artifacts. (50–1)

The cult is shaped not only with people's faith but also their sense of unity under these sacred icons and images. Precisely, Kumari connotes Nepali people's faith in divinity against the backdrop of secular state affairs, irrespective of their social backgrounds and ideological belief systems.

The Kumari cult of Kathmandu has become a rich cultural heritage of South Asia. In Nepal, it blends the male and the female, Hinduism and Buddhism, and myth and history. The Hindu King used to take blessings from the Buddhist Newar Kumari in Basantapur Square. Kumari on screen has made this cultural heritage more popular in recent years, drawing attention equally from tourists, visitors, and artists home and abroad.

A Sanskrit derivation of *kaumarya*, Kumārī means princess. Literally, Kumārī means "virgin girl" in Nepali, derived from the Hindu faith. In Kathmandu, Kumārī comes from the Buddhist Newar communities, particularly Shakya and Bajracharya. A prepubescent Newar girl embodies divinity and spiritual power in an incarnation of the Hindu Goddess Durga known as a Newa girl, Talejū (Tulaja) Bhawani, Bhagawati, Kālī, Pārvatī, Tripurasundarī, and Ambikā. In the Vedic tradition, Kumārī supports gods to control demons, whereas Durgā is identified not just as a goddess, but as the goddess, called Mahā Devī or "the great goddess" (Ghimire 24).

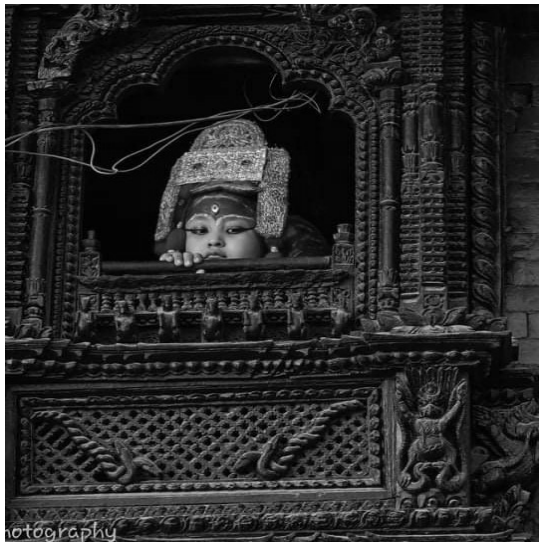

Figure 1.3. Kumari looking through the window of the Kumari Chhen (Source: Neeraj Maharjan's private collection)

Figure 1.4. Kumari in full costume and make up (*Source: Neeraj Maharjan's private collection*)

Astrid Zotter explores change and continuity in the ritual worship of Kumari and the Kumari cult in Kathmandu:

> Two different strategies seem to have been at work in bringing about this unification of practices. On the one hand, the Mallas' rituals were largely left intact, not only in the other two palaces of the valley, but also in Kathmandu. With the Mallas' ritual specialists being financed by the state, the rituals that focused on Ugracaṇḍā and Taleju continued to be staged. On the other hand, new elements, specialists, and worship arenas were added. Rather than dropping older practices or letting the deities involved be worshipped by new specialists or new procedures, the previous dynasty's performances were "tuned in." The minor recalibrations, with which this was achieved, however, were probably hardly noticed by common people and observers. They were made visible in the present contribution by putting the specialists' texts into dialogue. A comparison of the ritual timings recorded in Malla period diaries with the schedule advanced in the Shah period reveals a reworking, which was advanced as a rectification in accordance with what the authoritative textual tradition mandates. Thus, supremacy and authority were established through the means of ritual itself. (57)

Kumari in Kathmandu is present in several myths. First, King Jayaprakash Malla is credited with initiating the practice of selecting Kumari from the Shakya or Bajracharya family. The Goddess Taleju frequently visits the king in the palace. After realizing the queen's secret inspection of their secret meetings, she stops visiting the king. Once she appears with the king, promising that she will reincarnate as Kumari among children of the Shakya and Bajracharya Buddhist Newars. Then, the king not only introduced the practice of choosing a virgin Newar girl from the Shakya or Bajracharya family but also got a Kumari Chhen (Kumari Ghar) Goddess to reside near Basantapur Palace. Hence, it is believed that Kumari, with the spirit of Taleju and Durga, used to bless the king in the past and currently blesses the president.

Secondly, Taleju promises King Trailokya that she will reappear in the body of a young girl of the Shakya family. Taleju and the king play dice (Tripasa) in the palace every night. At one point, the king infuriates the Goddess with an inappropriate sexual advancement while they are playing dice. Consequently, she stops visiting the king, in order to punish him for his indecency. Later, the Goddess promises to reappear in the body of a virgin girl of the Shakya family in response to the king's routine worship and recurring request. In that way, Kumari was established by King Trailokya.

Buddhism and Hinduism in Harmony in South Asia

Nepal is a remarkable site of amalgam for Buddhism and Hinduism. Buddhists and Hindus mostly celebrate the same festivals, such as Buddha Purnima, Durga Puja, and Lhosar with fairs and feasts. Nepal has been a notable nation for its religious harmony and cultural assimilation. Besides, Muslims and Christians have been residing in perfect harmony with Hindus and Buddhists without any conflict despite some differences in their belief systems. The female deity's blessing to the male king embodies a blend of the spiritual and the political. Eventually, the Hindu king absorbs the Buddhist tradition, paying homage to the Buddhist Kumari. Siddhartha Gautama Buddha is considered the light of Asia whose birth in Lumbini in Nepal and enlightenment in the Indian town of Gaya invokes religious harmony between South Asian neighbors. Religious harmony in the South Asian region is substantiated with the Buddhist girl's blessing to the Hindu king, and Gautama Buddha's message of peace and non-violence.

The continuity of and changes to Kumari have been represented accurately in *Living Child Goddess in Nepal.* Expounding on the Kumari cult of South Asia, Michael Allen recaptures the Kumari journey in dichotomies:

> All of the dichotomies, including the inner/outer, are relative, not absolute, and hence there are both gradations and inversions as regards the identification of Kumari. The most superficial and outer form of the goddess is simply as a pure young virgin girl—as such she is, thought to varying degrees, potentially accessible to all those of clean caste in the form of young pre-menstrual girls who suffer from no obvious imperfection or blemish. Hence the proliferation of living Kumaris across a wide spectrum of Newar castes and communities. Purity, not high order initiation, is the sole criterion for worship of such girls. (90)

Allen justifies the purity of the girl for her selection as Kumari. It has mythic resonance with the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ's mother in Christianity. A preadolescent girl from the Shakya or the Bajracharya Newar family is chosen for Kumari which means she is both sacred and a virgin.

Regarding this dichotomy, Gopal Singh Nepali analyzes the material dimension of the Newari culture in *The Newars.* Nepali has closely examined a high degree of the Newars' material culture and their unique social institution. The Newars have been conserving their rich cultural heritage, and their performances have become more popular among the non-Newars with modern media, such as cinema and television. Nepali records

the Newars Lankhe in the streets at night, appealing to a large audience (262–3). Nepali highlights the performative dimensions of Newari art and theater. Kumari's view of the Lankhe performance during Indra Jatra[9] resonates with spectators' precious cultural diversity. On this occasion, Hindus and Buddhists come together, sharing a full spectrum of the visual spectacle of the rich Newa culture.

In this way, this chapter exposes the spiritual voyage of Kumari through the material world in documentary cinema, from the ethnic Newar to the global sphere, as well as a motif of tradition and modernity, with significant social transformations and political changes accompanying it. Further, it highlights the Newar folk life with the potential of inspiring the future generation to feel pride in their ancient civilization. In addition to appropriating the regional picturesque, there are cinematic techniques and conventions applied to expose the aesthetic dimensions of the spectacle of Kumari in the architectural spaces of *bahals* and squares in Kathmandu. Cinematically, close up shots of Kumari alongside long shots of the background recapitulate the energy and vitality of the Living Goddess in the context of contemporary social realities.

Newa Arts and Aesthetics

The visual spectacle of Kumari exposes a strong bond between the rural and the urban. Indigenous people of the Kathmandu Valley and the rural inhabitants have protected the area's rich cultural heritage. They promote individual relationships, share food, play music, and engage in performative arts. The performative mode of Kumari connects the film industry and the indigenous-ethnic culture, adopting work and dance together. Cinematic adaptations of Kumari exhibit marked connections between the indigenous economy and the modern film industry, between replicas of tradition and modernity.

Living Child Goddess in Nepal narrates the Newa[10] consciousness of the pilgrimage and the relationship among their clans and others. The chariot of Kumari can also be taken for the Newa pilgrimage to the street from the Kumari Ghar. Kumari's pilgrimage brings together the royals and the commoners and the Newa and the other tribes in the streets of Kathmandu. In recent years, these religious voyages have been replaced by popular commercial travels, such as field trips, excursions, and trekking. However, the Kumari chariot continues with increasing audiences, from the rural and the urban, the capital and its outskirts.