

Nepal to probe role of living goddess: Inquiry ordered into possible exploitation

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The Supreme Court of Nepal has ordered an inquiry into whether the centuries-old tradition of worshiping a virgin girl as a “living goddess”—called the Kumari Devi—has led to the exploitation of young girls and violates their human rights.

The order came after a child rights lawyer, who says she only wants to reform the tradition, not abolish it, filed a petition. Other activists have lodged their own court case aimed at keeping the tradition unchanged.

Traditionally, the young girl chosen to be deified as Kumari comes from the country’s Buddhist community, even though she is believed to be the bodily incarnation of the Hindu goddess Taleju. Once the girl meets strict criteria and passes certain tests, she is worshiped as a goddess by both Hindus and Buddhists until she reaches puberty, when she is replaced by another girl.

The young “living goddess” is isolated from family and friends and revered. Every one of her motions is interpreted as “divine instruction.” From the age of five or six, a girl selected to be the Kumari spends her childhood going through a series of rituals and has little contact with the outside world.

The Hindu king of Nepal traditionally worships the goddess during the Indra Jatra festival, which is celebrated in the capital city of Kathmandu in early autumn.

A final ruling by the Supreme Court is expected after a three-month inquiry is completed by Nepal’s Ministry of Culture. *—Religion News Service*