Societal Perception on Chhori (Daughter) in Nepali Society

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Abstract

This study explores the evolving socio-cultural and religious perceptions of Chhori-daughters-in Nepali society. Rooted in traditional Hindu rituals and symbolism, daughters are revered as embodiments of divine feminine energy, yet simultaneously constrained by patriarchal ideologies such as Parai Dhan (property of others). Through an emic lens and ethnographic insights, this study investigates the complex intersection of reverence and marginalization surrounding daughters. It reveals how festivals, rites of passage and shifting legal and feminist discourses are reshaping the societal role of daughters, while highlighting the enduring emotional bond symbolized by Maiti Ghar (natal home). The findings suggest both a persistent gendered structure and emerging spaces for equality and empowerment.

Keywords *Chhori, Parai Dhan, Maiti Ghar, Ritual, Symbolic representation*

Introduction

Yatranāryastu pūjyante ramante tatradevatāḥ
Yatraetāstu napūjyante sarvāstatrā phalāḥkriyāḥ
(Manusmriti 3.56)

"Where women are honored, divinity blossoms there; where they are dishonored, all

actions, no matter how noble, remain unfruitful."

A canonical Hindu legal text named Manusmriti — foundational verse — fluently defines the societal and spiritual ideal regarding the placement of women in Hindu society. It serves not only as a theological declaration but as a cultural compass that has long shaped gender relations in South Asia. In the Nepali context, this principle takes on unique dimensions when we consider the identity and role of the Chhori. Revered as embodiments of divine feminine energy—often equated with goddesses such as Durga, Saraswati and Laxmi—daughters are spiritually sanctified in religious and cultural life. The *Durga Saptashati* or *Chandi Path* profoundly shapes the Hindu imagination of the feminine—not just religiously, but culturally, psychologically and socially. It focuses on women as a complex, multiform image of womanhood in Hinduism, where the feminine is considered as divine, powerful, mysterious and cosmetically central, not only subordinate and passive. While the *Durga Saptashati* glorifies divine femininity, the social reality of women in historical Hindu society often limited them to roles of wife, mother, or daughter under patriarchal norms. This creates a sacred/profane split: Goddesses are worshipped, but women as humans are often restricted or idealized according to narrow virtues (chastity, obedience, motherhood). The ideal woman becomes one who channels *Śakti*, but in a socially acceptable form—graceful, self-sacrificing and devoted. Thus, the text also informs both empowerment and idealization, contributing to contradictions in how women are perceived. However, this honor is frequently counterbalanced by a social ideology that views daughters as *Parai Dhan* bound by obligations to eventually leave the Maiti Ghar and assimilate into their husband's household.

In Nepali Hindu society, women occupy a complex and paradoxical position: at once revered as embodiments of divine feminine energy (śakti) and constrained by patriarchal structures that circumscribe their agency. *Durga Saptashati,* also known as Devi Mahatmyam or Chandi Path, is a powerful and central scripture in the tradition of Hinduism, emphasizing the divine feminine (śakti) in her most glorious, protective and mystical forms. It forms part of the *Markandeya Purana* (Chapters 81–93) and consists of 700 verses (*saptashati*), praising the Goddess in her multiple manifestations. The text

contains the glorification of the feminine power and position. The *Durga Saptashati* is not merely devotional poetry—it is theological, philosophical and symbolic. It glorifies the feminine mystique by portraying the Goddess not just as a nurturer but as the supreme cosmic power, destroyer of evil and embodiment of divine wisdom.

The text does not depict the Goddess merely as a consort or subordinate. Instead, she is: The ultimate reality (*Para Brahma*), responsible for creation, preservation and destruction. The female is identified with Maha Maya, the cosmic illusion that even gods like Vishnu and Shiva cannot escape. Female energy is worshiped as both formless and with form, showing the paradoxical and mystical nature of the divine feminine:

"Ya Devi sarva-bhuteshu śakti-rupena samsthita..."(*Durga Saptasati Chandi, n.d.*) "To that Devi who resides in all beings as power (śakti), we bow again and again."

This litany is repeated with various attributes like *buddhi (intelligence)*, *smriti (memory)*, *kanti (beauty)*, *daya (compassion)*, *nidra (sleep)* — glorifying the feminine as immanent in all aspects of life and consciousness.

The presence of powerful goddesses like Taleju, Guhyeshwari and the living Kumari tradition underscores cultural respect for feminine divinity. However, women's lived realities—rooted in patriarchy, caste and tradition—often diverge sharply from such high spiritual symbolism. This essay explores the divine status conferred upon women through goddess worship, sacred rituals and symbolism and analyzes how these sacred roles coexist with social subordination. Drawing on ethnographic and historical research, this study argues that while goddess traditions offer powerful symbolic affirmation of women's sanctity, patriarchal institutions limit the conversion of that divine status into everyday equality.

The dual perceptions are regarding women in Nepali society—sacred yet dispensable—manifest in everyday practices, rituals and social expectations that define the daughter's role in the household and society (Ghimire, Kafle, & Karki, 2024). It is the ritual honor during the Teej and Tihar festivals in the patriarchal system, where it helps to exclude ritual

purity taboos, inheritance and dowry systems of Society. This paper investigates such contradictions through a qualitative analysis of traditional and contemporary perceptions of daughters in Nepal, drawing from personal observation, religious texts, ritual practices, legal reforms and evolving feminist interpretations. By unpacking these layers of cultural symbolism and lived experience, the study aims to deepen our understanding of the socio-cultural significance of Chhori in Nepali society and contribute to the broader discourse on gender and cultural identity in South Asia.

Research on gender and social structure in South Asian societies, particularly Nepal, has increasingly focused on the juxtaposition of ritual respect and systemic gender inequity. Scholars such as David Gellner (2001) and Nancy Levine (1987) have documented the intricate blend of Hindu-Buddhist practices that frame gender identities in Nepal, especially the dichotomous reverence and marginalization of women and daughters. David Gellner (2001) focuses on the combination of religious thought and practices with the construction of the uniqueness of Nepali interpretation of femininity, with divinity according to myth, but forced in practice. Meena Acharya and Lynn Bennett (1981) mention the spiritual roles, rights and gender-based division of labor. There is the practice of culturally declared as holy to the daughter but not consistently agency inheritance, decision maker, worship practices, ploughing their fields and ritual authority holder. Bhattachan, Sunar and Gauchan (2009) emphasize that caste and ethnicity intensify the scenario, frequently condemning Dalit and Janajati daughters to even more hazardous positions within kinship and community structures. An additional feminist, Nira Yuval-Davis (1997), has focused on daughters about the impact of gendered nationalism on making female identities, which are boundary markers for cultural purity, religious morality and family honor. Marital practice in Nepal has quite clear customs, expectations of virginity and a dowry system. Thus, the literature supports a multidimensional understanding of Chhori—not merely as biological offspring, but as deeply symbolic agents whose bodies and behaviors sustain socio-cultural order, often at the expense of personal autonomy. The term "Daughter" in English prefers only genealogical, while the term "Chhori" in Nepali has a more complex cultural and social meaning. The concept of Parai Dhan has a significant meaning that

a daughter is a temporary member of the natal home that have to leave and serve her marital home after marriage, which is rooted in patriarchal Hindu mythology. Chhori's position in Maiti Ghar is as a guest only, where there is a contrast with Chhora (son), who is believed to be a lineage bearer and a permanent member of the home. Previous studies on Chhori emphasized that daughters are only subordinate, discriminated, marginal and peripheral kinship agents of the family; however, this paper broadly analyzes that Chhori are sacred, pure and respected kin members of the family.

Methodology

I have employed a qualitative method to investigate the socio-cultural importance of Chhori in Nepali society. The qualitative information was collected through the emic approach. I have employed the secondary sources of data that were archived in online journals and books in online databases, YouTube and religious texts (ie, Puran, Chandi and Upanishad). My own experience and understanding, being a member of the Nepali society, I collect the information related to the daughter or Chhori. This study tries to explore the socio-cultural scenario of Chhori. This study discussed different issues, records and socio-cultural for the proper explanation of the Chhori. This study explores the past and present perception and preferential treatment of daughters. In addition, I have analyzed the information through the symbolic approach, in which I have taken the notion of purity and pollution and sacred and profane.

Findings and Discussion

Symbolic Representations and Ritualization

The spiritualization of daughters in Nepal begins at birth. The Kumari tradition exemplifies the deep-seated belief in feminine purity and spiritual power. However, this reverence is conditional and temporal (Allen, 1975). During rituals such as *Gunyo Cholo,*[1] a girl is celebrated much like a bride, signaling her transition into adolescence and eventual

1 Gunyo Cholo is a Hindu traditional ritual, which perform before puberty. On this auspicious ritual in which, parents gifted traditional attire to their respective daughter. This is luminal phase of adolescent and marriage.

departure from Maiti Ghar. This ritual acts as both empowerment and prelude to separation. Perhaps the most striking manifestation of divine status is the Kumari tradition: young prepubescent girls chosen to embody the goddess Taleju, revered as living deities until menstruation begins. Selection from high-caste Newar Buddhist families, rigorous criteria of physical and psychological purity and sustained ritual worship underscore how vividly the tradition enshrines a girl as divine. The Kumari is believed to bestow blessings, heal the sick and protect the community and nation. She is revered in major festivals—Indra Jatra, Kumari Jatra and Dashain—and even former monarchs paid obeisance to her in public ceremonies, Kandel (2025 January 31). Her divine status isolates her physically and ritually, yet elevates her symbolically as the pure vessel of goddess power. However, the divine status is fleeting: upon first menstruation, the goddess is said to depart and the girl returns to ordinary—often marginalized—life. Former Kumaris may struggle with identity, education disruption, social reintegration and stigmas around marriage; the psychological and social effects of transitioning from godhood to mortality are significant.

Central to the divine feminine in Nepal is the worship of Taleju Bhawani, a manifestation of Durga, historically revered as the royal tutelary goddess by the Malla kings (Slusser, 1996). The belief that the Kumari—the living goddess—is the corporeal incarnation of Taleju amplifies this tradition. Other local goddesses—Guhyeshwari, Bindhyabasini and Matrikas (eight mother goddesses around Kathmandu)—carry powerful connotations of creative, regenerative and protective energies, rooted in Shakta Hinduism and tantric practice. These temple-centered goddesses represent an idealized divine femininity: powerful, autonomous and sacred. In Pokhara's Bindhya Basini and Tal Barahi temples, goddess worship symbolically promotes the dignity and agency of women by modeling divine femininity in protective and independent roles (Regmi et.al, 2023).

Despite these religious affirmations of female divinity, Nepali society remains structurally patriarchal. From birth, girls are socialized into dependency: their roles are largely domestic, their education often interrupted by early marriage and their autonomy limited by caste based and religious norms.

Ancient and medieval legal systems (Kirata, Licchavi, medieval Nepal) embedded women's subordination through patrilineal inheritance, early marriage, restrictions on widow remarriage and exclusion from political and economic domains. Cases such as the Khasa women were exceptions; broader patriarchy relegated women to symbolic purity and service roles while limiting material agency.

Women's fertility and menstruation are paradoxically both sanctified and stigmatized. Menstrual blood is revered as powerful regenerative energy in festival contexts, but seen as impure otherwise. Symbolic auspiciousness is invoked through red garments, vermilion and fertility rituals, yet many temple spaces barred menstruating women and women were excluded from the priesthood or ritual leadership.

Symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) provides a proper theoretical frame here. The symbolic actions of gift-giving, *tika* (Auspicious grain-vermillion) ceremonies and fasting during festivals not only construct the social meaning of daughterhood but also reinforce normative expectations. Rituals are not passive—they are performative sites where cultural meanings are reproduced and internalized. In this context, the festival of Teej becomes crucial. While often celebrated as an empowering homecoming for daughters, it simultaneously reinforces the ideal of the self-sacrificing, devoted wife. Daughters fast for their husbands or future husbands, pray for marital bliss and participate in religious practices that continue to center on male well-being. Scholars critique Teej for glorifying female endurance while cloaking gendered inequality in celebratory forms. Teej festival has cultural meaning of bond between brother and sister as well as daughter and parents that symbolizes the connection of purity and sacred bond when the Chhori enters the home during the festival (Bennet, 2002). According to Ganga K.C. "In the context of Nepal, many Teej-related values and practices are continued by the women who participate in it. On the other side, changes have also become an inevitable component of these festivals celebrated within the dynamic framework of Nepali society and culture" (2015, p.288).

Gendered Socialization and Cultural Norms

From early childhood, Chhori are socialized into gendered expectations that frame them as nurturing, obedient and transient members of the natal home. Schools, media and family interactions reinforce ideals of female modesty, chastity and service. Educational access has expanded, yet a persistent gender gap remains, especially in rural areas (UNESCO, 2023). Parents often invest less in daughters' long-term education or career prospects, assuming they will marry and join another household.

Media representations also play a pivotal role in this process. Nepalese television serials and folk songs show the self-sacrificing daughter as the emotional attachment of the family, but they often show her as being tied down by patriarchy. There is the famous saying in Nepal that "*Chhori Janme ko Karma ho, Parmeshwar ko joicchya*— To have a daughter is destiny and one must accept God's will, which reflects both resignation and deification.

This dichotomous concept of Chhori in the symbolic structural system focuses on complete participation in society being denied. As Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) explains, in her "patriarchal bargain," women and daughters are frequently internalized and negotiate their positions within the patriarchal structure, obtaining prestige and safety through conformity rather than opposition. This difference between social subordination and divine symbolism focuses on the uncertainty of Nepali culture. There is the belief in the sacred tradition of virginity, goddess Kumari symbolized as divine power, honoring the feminine, where examples include fertility-based rituals, goddesses, living Kumaris and priestesses. However, patriarchal systems limit access of women to ritual purity, property, education and priesthood.

The Constitution of Nepal (2015) was a landmark document, acknowledging daughters' equal inheritance rights, where daughters are legally eligible to ancestral or parental property, have a right to register marriage without parental approval and protection from domestic abuse under the 11th amendment to the Muluki Ain 2018. However,

implementation remains inconsistent. Human Rights Watch (2020) notes that social stigma and familial pressure deter many daughters from claiming their legal rights. Moreover, the judicial system often lacks gender sensitivity and local authorities may prioritize customary norms over constitutional mandates.

Economic participation remains another area of structural disparity. Though female labor force participation has increased (World Bank, 2022), women—especially daughters-in-law—are often limited to the unpaid or informal sectors. Vocational training, land ownership and bank access for young women continue to lag, curbing their autonomy.

Contemporary feminist scholars and activists in Nepal have increasingly turned to reinterpret religious texts and myths to subvert patriarchal readings. Figures like Sita are being reimagined not as passive sufferers but as strategic survivors. Draupadi's polyandry, often viewed with suspicion, is reframed as autonomy in choosing her fate, challenging monogamous idealizations of female virtue (Sharma, 2023). The growing popularity of women's literature, theatre and visual art reflects an emerging agency among Chhori. In urban centers, daughters are actively questioning norms, challenging forced marriages and demanding bodily autonomy. Another example is how women raise their voices against sexual and structural violence under the movement of the # Rage Against Rape in Nepal. Yong Nepali female youth can bear narratives to formal education and international feminist solidarity. Local tradition can succeed in hybrid identities, with anchored and resistant, traditional and transformative.

There is the concept of Chhori that is both celebrated and subjugation in Nepali society. Chhori are taken as divine power in ritual and religion, yet there is a restriction on rights and autonomy. The contradictory roles of Chhori in the theoretical structure of structural functionalism display how such positions disadvantage one gender, being consistent with the social structure of Nepal, which maintains equilibrium by giving different roles. The persistence of Parai Dhan, despite legal and cultural advancements, reveals how deep-rooted ideologies resist reform. However, the agency shown by young daughters in education, activism and reinterpretation of norms signals a quiet revolution. This paper

argues that the role of daughters must be critically re-examined—not only as cultural subjects but also as rights-bearing citizens with full access to property, voice and power.

Conclusion

This paper and the discussed case foreground a deep-rooted paradox in the way Nepali society considers Chhori. They are symbolically and culturally portrayed as powerful, but in practice, their role is more emotional and participatory. Daughters are respected, but their role is limited in both family and society. They are marginalized. Ritual tradition and practices, mythology and legal reform seem to be contradictory to each other. In the process of evolution as a significant member of society, Chhoris are treated as having a dual identity. The concept of Parai Dhan and patriarchal rites exists. The advocacy of feminist self, legal empowerment and cultural reinterpretation is creating new pathways for daughters to reclaim space, voice and agency. Whether as divine figures in festivals, caretakers in families or professionals in society, daughters in Nepal are increasingly visible and vocal in shaping their identities. This paper argues for the intrusive use of goddess traditions to promote women's dignity and agency. It sought public awareness, legal reform and education movements to challenge patriarchal customs. As Nepal's constitution affirms gender equality, civil society addresses menstrual taboos and child marriage and psychological support is introduced. These reforms seek to reconcile the symbolic divine status of Chhori with concrete gender justice. Women in Nepali Hindu society occupy a dual role: sacred embodiments of feminine divine power and subjects of patriarchal control. Goddess worship, Kumari tradition, festivals and temples celebrate the potency of feminine energy, fertility and auspiciousness. However, women's everyday experiences are circumscribed by caste, patriarchy and economic dependency. Females' participation in religious and symbolic spheres remains symbolic and culturally rich, but does not inherently destroy the structural inequalities that women face. This paper aligns with academic activism and aims to translate this veneration into tangible respect, dignity and agency. For further and appropriate mainstreaming of Chhoris in Nepali society, academia requires integrating recognition of graceful femininity with legal, educational and social reforms. By critically engaging with goddess traditions,

scholars and practitioners may help reconceive divine symbolism not as a paradoxical contradiction, but as a resource for promoting women's rights, dignity and empowerment in Nepali Hindu society.

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