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The Practice of Worshipping Goddesses in Tal Barahi and Bindhyabasini Temples: Implications for Promoting Dignity of Women

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ABSTRACT

The Pokhara valley, with so many Hindu temples of goddesses, offers an unexplored relationship between the stories documented about the goddesses, their worship and women's dignity. This paper explores two of these monuments namely Tal Barahi and Bindhyabasini with an aim to find out their latent religious existence and socio-cultural implications. Through an ethnographic inquiry and narrative analysis, it excavates the links between the stories documented, the worship practice, and the symbolic meaning that exists behind them. Along with the narratives afloat on mythical, narrative, and local cultural grounds of these religious abodes, this study focuses on the message to acknowledge, accept, and respect women, which the practice of goddess worship exudes. The paper concludes that the goddess worship is a custom that commenced as a form of veneration to their attributes of human welfare, it advocates free will and agency for women, thus bearing the possibility to be adapted as a religious tool to promote women's dignity.

KEYWORDS: Hindu goddesses, religious abodes, goddess worship, cultural practices, women's dignity

INTRODUCTION

The Pokhara valley possesses many temples named after the Hindu goddesses like Tal Barahi, Bindhyabasini, Bhadrakali, Manakamana, Akala Devi, Sitala Devi, and many others. Daily ritualistic and special occasional worships are done to these goddesses as female prowess. It indicates an unexplored relationship between the practice of goddess worship and women's dignity. This paper explores two of these monuments namely—Tal Barahi and Bindhyabasini, with an aim to find out the significance of their religious and cultural existence and its implications in relation to women's dignity.

The paper is based on an ethnographic inquiry through which a thematic and narrative analysis is undertaken to excavate if there lies any link between these goddesses and women, their worship and women's dignity. In doing so, the researchers draw ideas from the scholars who have produced discourse on dignity along with a brief peep into the narratives afloat on mythical, narrative, and local cultural grounds of these religious abodes.

This study focuses on what messages the goddess worship practice is trying to exude and if it possesses any possibility, how its popularity can be molded as a religious or cultural tool to promote women's dignity at social level. On the other hand, the information collected, data analyzed, interpreted, and published can be a resource for the support and substantiation in the arena of cultural study about the Hindu goddesses.

As discussed in details below in the literature review, a few studies have been done on Kali and only on the goddesses of Kathmandu valley, though there are many temples of goddess in the Pokhara valley alone; What they represent is not yet brought into light. Provided that it is unfolded, it can be used in simplifying and contextualizing the concepts of the religious cult of Hindu goddesses which in the Pokhara valley must have deeper implications that can be studied to bring about a positive change in the day-to-day life of people and their treatment to women in general.

The primary objective of this paper is to find out who and why the practice of worshipping Hindu goddesses was established in the Pokhara valley and how this practice has impacted over times or can influence people's treatment to women in the days to come.

The limitation of the paper is to deal with only two of the goddess temples explicitly Tal Barahi, and Bindhyabasini, which are situated in the Pokhara valley. Likewise, the study takes into account only the iconographical description and iconological interpretation of these temples.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In the religious and social discourses afloat all over the world, there are various reasons and records documented about the worship of goddesses. According to Mahalik (2009), the worship of Mother-goddess in the East can be traced back to the Rig-Vedic period or *Indus Valley- Civilization*; the word '*Sakti*' denotes 'power'. Every human has some inherent power called *Sakti*. The power is a manifestation of *Para Sakti*, the Supreme Goddess worshipped as Mother *Maa* (p. 118). She is believed to have created God Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar. In Hindu mythology, Brahma is the creator, Vishnu is the administrator and Maheshwar is the destroyer. It is believed that they collectively created the world. Not only the creator but she is also the manifestation of all powerful

female principle i.e., the *Prakriti* [nature] or *Sakti* [power] and eventually is associated with the male principle *Purusha* [male] (p. 118). Linking the creative aspect of this cult, Mahalik (2009) states, “The *Sakti* cult emphasizes total involvement with life, where sexual impulse is accepted, transformed and harmonized for one to attend spiritual realization. The worship of Goddess is often associated with worship of God” (p. 118). Thus, an effort is made to establish neutrality through an association of the goddess to the god.

Shedding light upon the assignation of Shakti or goddess form with a procreation, Mahalik (2009) again informs about the transporting of the *Purusha* form to it so as to accomplish the act of creation where nudity is naturalness not profanity or promiscuity. As an instance he cites Sitala Devi’s [goddess Sitala] example from the Puranas, “Sitala we are told in Puranas, should always be represented in a state of perfect nudity” (Mahalik, 2009, p. 119). Thus, she stands as a symbol. A symbol shapes a cultural code according to anthropologist Clifford Geertz as he notes:

[R]eligious symbols shape a cultural ethos, defining the deepest values of a society and the persons in it. Religion, is a system of symbols which act to produce powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations" in the people of a given culture. A "mood" for Geertz is a psychological attitude such as awe, trust, and respect, while a "motivation" is the social and political trajectory created by a mood that transforms mythos into ethos, symbol system into social and political reality (a cited in Christ, 2012, pp. 1-2)

As a religion exerts a deep, compelling hold on the psyches of many people, even people no longer "believe in God" or participate in the institutional structure of patriarchal religion still may not be free from the hold of the power of the symbolism of God as it seeps into and exists in their social and political reality.

Unlike the Christ’s placing of the deities on the psychic level, Ghimire (2018) takes the goddesses to the level of material spirituality as opposed to the ethereal reality by citing the case of *Kumari*, the living goddess. He opines that deities are strictly relegated to the spiritual realm, never actually seen by the mortal devotees on Earth. Nepal is the only country where one can meet and receive blessings from the *Kumārī* [the virgin goddess] - living goddesses who is believed to be the human incarnation of Durgā, the demon-slaying Hindu goddess of power (Ghimire, 2018, p. 37). Likewise, Majupurias opine that female goddesses in Nepal “are most complex and most powerful, they have maternal natures and some are closely identified with male deities” (p. 112). They hint at the co-existence of male and female aspects of the deities.

Sapkota (2013) analyses goddesses *Kali* [a Hindu goddess believed to be black in color and considered to be the goddess of ultimate power] through three tiers meaning (Panofsky, 2009, p. 222; Sapkota, 2013, p. 17). He concludes that the goddess *Kali* stands even superior that the lord Shiva in stepping over his chest in her rage. Gupto (2020) connects the goddesses to grace which according to Friedrich Schiller in “On Grace and Dignity” is a synonym for dignity (pp. 370-76). Gupto demonstrates, goddess worship has been a practice for ages with sheer devotion, faith and sense of awe; mostly the sense of grace, rage, and power has been highlighted.

Hence, as the review reports, the goddesses are worshipped owing to the realization of female power for altruism in turn as a respect and devotion to it. The Christ’s placing of the deities on the psychic level sounds scientific. Ghimire’s (2018)

taking the goddesses to the level of material spirituality by citing the case of *Kumari*, the living goddess is fetching the defamiliarized deities to the familiar world of humans. Sapkota tends elevating the goddess *Kali* superior to the lord Shiva even though at least in her rage. Finally, Gupto (2020) connects the goddesses to grace which implies dignity (pp. 370-76). Thus, as the review demonstrates, the goddess worship has been a practice for ages with sheer devotion, faith, and a sense of awe; mostly the sense of grace, rage, and power has been highlighted. However, the goddesses and the various aspects of their worship have not been well researched and studies have not been undertaken from the perspective of human dignity, which this paper focuses on.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This paper is a qualitative research based on the primary as well as secondary data, dealing with the available theoretical literature as well as many facts and figures. As per the articulation above, a lot of primary data has been collected through the participant and non-participant observations and in-depth interviews. Regarding the secondary sources of information, such as published booklets and stone-carving records were studied.

Research Design

The study, as planned, was carried out by undertaking an ethnographic research design. The temples were visited more than four times to study their external phenomena and operations in and about. In the first visit, all the documented records, written books, or narratives (as many as available) were consulted and collected. Likewise, during the second visit, the priests and some pilgrims were given in-depth interview. The focused group discussions with the conservation committee members and local people were conducted during the second or the third visit. The fourth visit was as a non-participant observer and a quiet photographer during the temple operated events like the *aarti* [lamp lighting ritual]. All the interviews were recorded in script and coded so that the crucial data would not be missed out.

Nature and Source of Data

The paper adopts qualitative research mostly based on primary data; however, it also has used an abundant of secondary data when it comes to available theoretical and empirical literature.

A lot of primary data has been collected through both the participant and non-participant observations and interviews. The participant observation was done in the disguise of a devotee or a pilgrim for more in-depth information. In addition, some secondary sources of information such as published booklets and stone-carving records were also collected and deployed for data mining.

Sampling Design

As per the plan for a purposive sampling design for the selection of the respondents, consisting of one priest, one committee member, one local resident and two visitors; altogether it made ten respondents. However, for the better validity of the data 10 more respondents were picked up randomly adopting the privilege of convenience sampling. The details are given in the table below. Though some literal numerical facts

are presented in the table, the interpretation has a strong qualitative orientation, demanded by the analysis and interpretation of the data that could not be most effectively put into or represented in numbers.

Data Collection Process

The temples were visited. The basic data (primary as well as secondary), such as through a short interview with the priests were collected. The information was recorded using pen and note pad. Some pictures were taken. In this way, the preliminary data collection was done. The contact numbers of the priests and committee members were collected.

The next step was making phone calls and fixing the days and times for the in-person interview as well as Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). During the temples visits, the FGDs were conducted. As a pilgrim, the principal author revisited the temples for participatory observations to illicit information being directly involved in the worship as a devotee (sometimes even in the disguise of a silent photographer). In this way, the data collection process was completed after the third or fourth visit. Finally, the data was processed, analyzed, and juxtaposed with the theories and concepts that resonate/d with them.

Data Analysis Method

The descriptive, analytical and interpretative modes were espoused and adopted for data analysis. More focus is on the analytical and interpretative aspects as they go along with the theoretical dimension presented by Panofsky (2009). The narratives available at local, mythical and cultural levels were analyzed and were juxtaposed with the conceptual and theoretical framework for validation.

To substantiate the data theoretically, the insights were drawn from the scholars such as Panofsky for his three-tiered meaning of visual art with an emphasis on only the iconographical description and iconological interpretation of the images. Likewise, Kant's and Schiller's ideas on human dignity are employed for they connect human dignity to many different categories like self-will, agency, and grace, which the narratives about the temples also resonate to.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptions of the Site

The temple of goddesses Tal Barahi is located in the middle of Fewa Lake. The location of the temple on a small island itself is a matter of awe for the devotees. It looks as if the goddess is given or received special situation as her abode; it has made special for her prominence. Built in the Pagoda style, it exudes grace. There stands Anadu Hill on its background with its dense flora and fauna making the locality a rich place of nature. The temple was rebuilt in 1904 A.D. Before this, the temple was one-storied and thatched roofed. It is not known exactly when and who constructed Tal Barahi temple. Later, a tall temple was built, but at present, it too has been demolished for its reconstruction.

Conversely, topographically Bindhyabasini stands atop a hill, looking over the city of Pokhara. The temple sits at some 3000 feet above the sea level. Bindhyabasini is considered to be the guardian deity. It is also recognized to be the incarnation of Kali. A

large number of Nepali and a considerable number of Indian Hindus visit this temple every year (Pokharel et al. 2023). It was established in 1845 A.D.

Both the temples are named after the goddesses who are believed to be residing in them. The regular two shifts (morning and day) worship is done in a disciplined manner as after taking a shower and wearing clean, pure (washed) attire. The statues are bathed with fresh water and worshipped as the revered mothers with the yellow and red powders, along with colorful flowers. First of all, the lamp is worshipped, then the water vessel termed as *kalas*, next the goddessess. Incense is burned or oil fed lamps are lit during the prayers, eventually a conch shell is blown and the bell is pealed as an invocation, which is also taken as a symbol of peace. *Aarti* is organized at the end of each worship. *Aarti* is considered the way to complete the *pooja* [worship] successfully as it marks its end. It is believed that it forges the mistakes if any had happened during the whole process of the *pooja*. It is the Hindu ritual employed in worship, often an integral part of every worship in which light is lit usually from a flame and offered to gods or goddesses and finally to oneself as a part of divine (Pokharel et al. 2023).

These days, in the evenings, *aarti* is organized as a special public *pooja* event. The oil and camphor powder-fed cotton wicks in a group or in bundles are waved for the veneration of deities. Hymns are sung or the recorded versions are played enthralling loud on the cassette players that transforms all the surrounding with a religious ambience. The devotees who join are asked to take part in the song and the dance. They get so moved that they make donations small or big to their choice. These donations are a part of the temples' regular income. Out of this, they pay the pilgrims and devotees back building infrastructures like the religious book stalls, shoe-stands which are kept in the temple vicinities, and senior citizens' meeting rooms.

It is believed that worshipping and making offerings to these goddesses during the nine days of Dashain proves to be more effective. Therefore, during these days, the devotees carry out the worship ritual with more reverence memorializing the assassination of the devil *Maishasur* by goddesses *Durga*. If even the devotees cannot manage, visiting these goddesses during the other times of the year, they throng these abodes in utmost and pious veneration within these nine days which are also called *nabaratha* (the nine days of the deities' more powerful presence). Holidays are given to the Hindus during this festival deeming it the mostly celebrated one. The worship is done with utter faith and devotion, so much so that this research sometimes found this practice to be too challenging to be even questioned for research.

Demographic Discrepancies of the Informants

A difference between the male and female devotees was noticed during the data collection. The difference is in terms of their presence, the roles they undertake and the agency they assume. In this regard, Pokharel et al. (2023) have documented that “the males were playing the most active agents, whereas the females were found taking the passive positions and indulging to withdrawals when it came to involving in discussion about the research issue, preaching at/from the temple yards and porches into and through the loud speakers.” The following table inscribes its numerical representation and facilitate a discussion on the probable latent reasons behind these phenomena.

Table 1
Gender-Wise Structure of the Respondents

Temple	Male	Female	Total
Bindhyabasini	7	3	10
Tal Barahi	6	4	10
Total Respondents	13	7	20

(Source: Pokharel et al., 2023)

Table 1 shows the uneven number of participants in terms of gender. The numbers being 14 and nine of males and females respectively. This shows that even in the matters of goddess worship and temple management, the participation of women is lesser than that of the males. This indicates the females' assumption of their agency with regard to their roles about the temples and worship affairs.

Demographic Data-Derived Results

According to Mr. Tirtha Shrestha, the president of Bindhyabasini Conservation Committee (BCC), the people worship goddesses for two reasons: either due to "*daar or bhar*" [fear or reliance] that is—fear of losing or hope of getting the desired kind of life or things in life (Personal communication, July 2, 2023, my translation). This can be taken as one of the critically rationalized interpretations among many formed out of the observation over many years in the area for Mr. Shrestha is one of the most learned, experienced and informed respondents. In addition to this, the conducted interviews, accomplished observations and FGDs on the topic unfold other many reasons of worship as indicated by the scholars in the literature review.

According to the Indian pilgrims interviewed at Tal Barahi temple, after visiting Muktinath, they usually come back to Tal Barahi. The male respondents said, "We respect women for we worship the goddesses, they are the mothers" (Personal communication, July 19, 2023). Likewise, the women seemed listened to, counted and respected as they were calmly treading side walk to the temple; they were "together" in a pilgrimage and sounded complimenting and complying to each other as they uttered a "hmn" and nodded their heads in acceptance of what their male pilgrims were reporting (Pokharel et al. 2023). As mentioned by Mahalik (2009), they were found to be respecting women and goddesses in the form of mothers, the incarnation of power.

As the in-depth interview conducted with Mr. Tirtha Shrestha about the goddess worship and empowerment, he opines,

Women should come together, unite and be economically independent to assert their freedom and exert their independence. At temples and worship affairs too, they should take initiatives. The differences are there on the social levels, at religious level females are ever worshipped, and looked upon as *shakti*, the half part of Shiva. Male and female aspects are taken to be complementary to each other in Hinduism at least (he brightens and smiles!). (Personal communication, July 22, 2023, my translation).

Mr. Shrestha states that coming to the forefront and taking initiative are what matters on part of women for showing a sense of contribution at and from religious level; there lies the opportunity for women to affirm and assert their agency too. Laxman Timilsena, the priest denied speaking much, maintained his grace and told that "everything is written in the book" (Personal communication, July 25, 2023, my translation). Indeed, as he states,

BCC has produced a lot of documented literature, which is available to the devotees, pilgrims, and researchers at its library.

The other two members interviewed were Ms. Sushila Baral and Mr. Nabaraj Timilsina respectively. They both opined that such academic initiatives will take the matter of empowerment and respect to a higher level and into the various strata of society (Personal communication, July 22, 2023, my translation).

With a view to holding a public discussion, two FGDs (one at each temple) were conducted at Bindhyabasini and Tal Barahi. A group of people from Bindhyachal, from where according to the hearsay, the statue of Bindhyabasini was brought to Pokhara was met and called for discussion. With a compliance they shared that they had made a pilgrimage to Muktinath and were at Bindhyabasini as it has a special place in their heart for, they believe in the narrative about the statue being brought from Bindhyachal, India. Owing to this reason, they feel a special connection to Pokhara. There was a kind of calmness and stillness in all of their faces. It indicated that people who come together through religion, share or make a pious link irrespective of their cast, creed, nationality and gender. They all opined that it is the will of the goddess they were here and also her will that we are sharing with each other (Personal communication (FGD), July 2, 2023, my translation).

On the other hand, the groups who involved in a discussion at Tal Barahi was different in the sense that they were all young people, college students—boys and girls. However, the responses they gave were not very different. They all said that they were the faith-led people regularly coming to the temple. One of the female respondents verbalizes:

We come here basically to hang out and worship. We never thought it that way, umm, I mean male/female way and why do we even bother, but what I know is whatever we wish thinking of the goddesses it comes true so we come to pay our homage, offer hard-shelled coconut, flowers and stuff. We never thought the way it can be used for uplifting our own status, sounds interesting, will you please give us your phone number (?). (Pokharel et al., 2023)

The unnamed (on choice) respondent's response implicates that the male versus female division is not in the religious psyche of the people. Even the gender-wise unbothered people visit the temple and worship the goddess.

Discussion

An in-depth analysis was possible with the help of the stories about the origin of the worship culture as documented in the booklets availed by the Temple Development Committee (TDC) and the information gained from the informants. The worship to Tal Barahi started after the whole village was drowned which turned into the present lake. Though the old woman was not there, the devotees started worshipping at her hut (then after turned into the temple) as the abode of the goddesses. The first temple, built in the Pagoda style, which was beautiful and graceful. It was rebuilt in 1904 A.D. (Makaju, 2014). Before this, the temple was one-storied and thatched roofed. It is not known exactly when and who constructed Tal Barahi Temple.

There is only one folk hearsay: there was a small village settlement at the place where there is Fewa Lake these days. Once the lord Shiva to check sin and atonement/expiation of the people came in a disguise of a sage. As it fell dark he went

from house to house but nobody gave him the lodging. Finally, a poor, old mother lodged him in her old ragged hut. The hard-bread-winning old mother, who depended on thresher and flail of other people, made him a bread of husk and served him with kindness. However, the ascetic made it into a ball without eating and said, “Mother! Leave this village before dawn tomorrow.” Having told merely this much, the sage disappeared. Before dawn the old mother also set on a journey. It is told that the present Tal Barahi Temple was the same old mother’s hut and the goddess Tal Barahi is the same old mother (Makaju, 2014). There is only this narrative available in terms with this temple and its history.

Likewise, Bindhyabasini has more than one folk story. The core of the legends is that—King Siddhi Narayan Shah of Kaskikot (a place in Pokhara) set out on a pilgrimage to the Vindhyachal¹ mountain to pay a pious visit to the goddess Vindhyavasinee. The goddess commended the king of Vindhyachal in his dream to send King Siddhi Narayan to his native land with a statue of the goddess as a reward of his devotion. The king after a grand religious ceremony handed the statue over to the king. The king returned from his pilgrimage, as he reached the spot which is occupied by the temple now. As he rested, he fell asleep placing the statue under the shadow of the tree (Pokharel et al., 2023).

The temple is situated atop a small hill and can be accessed via stone staircases on the East and North-East. It was established circa 1760 (Adhikari, 1960). Keeping in mind the easy access to the temple periphery, a lift has been installed. The installation most effectively caters the devotees who are differently abled. This is accomplished as a part of devotees’ comfort.

According to Nihsheshanand (2010), the goddess Bindhyabasini is not only the center of faith and the most adorable *Shakti* for all people, the divine mother exists like a living soul to all inhabitants. They sense her presence all around them, hence have a feeling that she is in them as a power within them to do social good in her name and commemoration. The main temple is devoted to the goddess Bindhyabasini, a *Bhagawati* [a goddess] who is believed to be the incarnation of *Kali*.

The Hindu goddesses are worshipped and venerated primarily for the attributes they implicate, the acts of altruism they partook and agency for human being’s good they demonstrated. Tal Barahi implicates the reward to generosity as the greatest virtue. The old lady who showed compassion and kindness to the stranger was ‘informed’ and saved (Pokharel et al., 2023). God saves the ones who have goodness and the goddesses seem to be the ones who possess goodness in them alike Tal Barahi. She acts as per Kant’s explanation, being abided by “the moral law” of a human, while giving the unknown but needy person a shelter during the night. She makes an apt decision which finally rescues her from the upcoming havoc, the flood (Pokharel et al., p. 29). In acting rationally and morally she shows dignity to the stranger hence herself gets dignified later as a goddess. Likewise, Bindhyabasini refers to the “bindu” or the point as a mark of own’s space. Meant to be taken to Kaskikot, she asserted her space at the place where the present temple is. In association, it connotes making or carving one’s space guided by self-will. It is also about using one’s agency about where one wants to be (Pokharel et al., p. 29).

¹ The Indians use the different spellings i.e., Vindhyavasinee, for Bindhyabasini, it resonates the Vindhyachal mountain where there is the temple of the same goddess by the same name.

Hence, the attributes like the feminine prowess and attributes such as the power of healing, compassion, solitude, self-will, and solitary, but fulfilling existence and personal agency which is the ability to act are symbolized by the goddesses. Moreover, the goddesses like Tal Barahi and Bindhyabasini depict dignity in the form of their individual “agency” (Hewson, 2010, p. 14).

Women are found to be enjoying their religious responsibilities along with men in some temple development committees. To illustrate, they undertake responsibilities during some specific events like *aarti* at Bindhyabashini Temple; however, the *mantras* are chanted and the *pooja* is done by all male priests (Pokharel et al., 2023). However, no woman was found participating in these *pooja* rituals around during the *aarti* performance at Tal Barahi.

It is evident that most of the people visit temples and worship goddesses out of their familial or social culture. Some have been doing it for personal satisfaction and some abiding by unquestionable faith. Surprising but it is the males who are appointed as the priests. It is the males who chant the *mantras* during *aarti* and also the preparations for *pooja* are done by them. When it comes to the number of people participating in things and events related to the Hindu goddess worship, it consists of the male majority as shown by Table 1. Irrespective of their sex or gender, the devotees hold and perform the undaunted faith to these goddesses. Reiterating the undaunted faith about the worship Pokharel et al. (2023) state:

Most of the pilgrims come out of faith, and belief which they don't like to be even questioned. They without a question and knowing about its second or alternative implication, carry on the practice of worship and paying homage. Also, most of them did not show the higher-level awareness such as the probability of extensive use of the goddess worship culture for the cause of women empowerment. (p. 31)

Worshipping the goddesses seems to be one of the belief-oriented daily routines among people in Pokhara. Though they worship the goddesses, they are unaware about the connection between worshipping goddess in the temple and behaving well with women at homes or at social settings. As most of the respondents were unable to think from the level of the questions, it can be deduced that they were unable to comprehend and connect the issues of goddess worship and dignity.

Some male respondents at times were found to be trying to level the issue or preserve the status quo by giving dismissive remarks like: “It's all ok, the atheists have sense of respect to women and they treat them well but the problem brews because of the sinful ones who do not have fear about the goddesses and the consequences of their own deeds” (Personal communication, July 26, 2023, my translation). It sounded somewhat convincing for all the pilgrims looked calm, composed, and compassionate (Pokharel et al., 2023, p. 32).

Perhaps, as Pokharel et al. (2023) opine if the respondents had been educated and religiously and culturally aware about these myths and narratives, they would have known the narratives about the goddesses and perhaps would have done better and deeper appraisal of women in personal and in general. However, the realities like no lead-role in the temples being undertaken by women, no roles during the events like *aarti* that would boost their confidence in speaking and facing the audience indicate that women have not shown or provided with the opportunities to exert their religious

agencies that could have had an empowering effect upon them at familial and social platforms.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Altogether 12 Hindu goddesses' temples in the Pokhara valley are documented in the records till date. There are other six temples such as Kaskikot Kalika, Kalika Batulechour, Bishnupaduka Bhagbhati, Kalikasthan Jhajharmare, Ajimala Devi Rupakot, and Kanchhi Barahi in addition to the six which this research mentions inclusive of the two it deals with in details. Between these two, Tal Barahi attracts not only the pilgrims and devotees, but also tourists as it is located in the middle of the scenic Fewa Lake that reflects the snow-peaked Machhepuchhere mountain into its bosom. Therefore, the people also visit this place for recreational activities such as boating and vlogging. Likewise, Bindhyabasini being located by the side of the ancient settlement of the city is thronged by Nepali as well as Indian pilgrims. The mythology behind the origin of the temple bears responsibility to this connection to the Vindhya mountain India and the pilgrims from there.

In Hinduism, as the study revealed, the female aspect has ever been placed in the uppermost strata of creation, respected, and worshipped. The people who observe a religion (especially Hinduism) do not dominate but tend to deify women at their homes and communities. Besides, the cases of indignity of women are rare in terms of religious narratives and hearsays.

Owing to their attributes like benevolence and altruism, their worship started. It was even initiated because the goddesses asserted their presence for social welfare and showed their self-will. They are found to be coming in proximity of the human beings to do something benevolent, be it to inculcate the sense of support to the needy and inculcate the sense of generosity (e.g. Tal Barahi). Their worship started in reverence and veneration to the good they did to the human beings.

Hence, the goddess worship in Hinduism can be a point of emulation for asserting and enhancing women's dignity; in turn, it can ascertain freedom and empowerment for women. In addition, women are to be indoctrinated that goddesses were not the victims but ever the assertive and self-willed rescuers who exerted their agency to accomplish the cause they wish to; hence, they were revered and dignified. The kind of divine power they showed in informing the devotees about their presence in their proximity was believed and bestowed with a sense of gratitude and devotion.

To conclude, there lies a lack of awareness and conscious critical inquiry; however, the goddesses' worship can be an effective religious tool to promoting women's agency and dignity. The goddess worship and its iconological interpretation bears a great deal of possibility to be deployed for women's upliftment in various journeys of their life, which will eventually transform their life into a dignified living.

The goddesses and their worship embed many other buried concerns and aspects, which was not possible to be dealt with in this paper. This study has raised but left unstudied or incomplete a couple of compelling questions to be answered by future researchers. Here, the queries like the follow may arise: Why is there the difference in the male and female participation during the worship? Why are people not able or ready to visualize the relation of women's dignity and goddess worship and implement its

indication to making an impact on wo/men's day-to-day life? These queries have not yet amply explored, which may be addressed by the future researchers.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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