

DEVOKI: THE GIRLS WHO WERE GIVEN TO THE GODS

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Among the inhabitants of the foothills of the Nepalese Himalayas there is a strong belief in the Hindu goddess Durga, who demands sacrifice and offerings, to induce her mercy, through the village temple shaman, the Dami.

In order to have their prayers answered, parents must offer their own young daughters as gifts to the temple, where they then live as Devoki. This custom is still very much alive today. These young girls are believed to be the wives of gods, and are not permitted to marry mortal men.

In the past, they were respected as “Devis”(goddesses), for their religious power. This power was known as “Sakti,” and believed to be the essence of the power of Siva. Their religious role was to purify the object of worship and help men unite with Sakti, as wives of Siva. They were supported by the temple and the local community, as people believed that taking care of Devis would bring them blessings and benefits.

In a scene in the documentary, a Devoki in her 40s remembers her youth, when she had been well taken care of; she reports that, “Once, the villagers offered me special food and a good sari. Whenever they saw me on the road, they respectfully said, ‘Here comes the Devi!’”

Since the government banned this religious custom in the 1960s, it has gone underground. Today, these girls have been forced to turn to prostitution to stay alive, and villagers will not admit their existence to strangers.

Interviews with the Devokis and villagers reveal the traditional religious custom of giving daughters to the gods and how it has changed. Their struggles to make a living were also a focus of this film.

This documentary was based on two years of research conducted with Professor G. M. Gurung of Tribhuvan University.

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Location: Far West Region of Nepal

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