

Nepal chooses a 2-year-old girl as new living goddess worshipped by both Hindus and Buddhists

By Binaj Gurubacharya
The Associated Press

KATHMANDU, Nepal — A 2-year-old girl chosen as Nepal’s new living goddess was carried by family members from their home in a Kathmandu alley to a temple palace during the country’s longest and most significant Hindu festival.

Aryatara Shakya, at 2 years and 8 months, was chosen as the new Kumari, or “virgin goddess,” replacing the incumbent, who is considered by tradition to become a mere mortal upon reaching puberty.

Kumaris are chosen from the Shakya clans of the Newar community, indigenous to the Kathmandu valley, and revered by both Hindus and Buddhists in the predominantly Hindu nation.

The girls are selected between the ages of 2 and 4 and are required to have unblemished skin, hair, eyes, and teeth. They should not be afraid of the dark.

During the Indra Jatra festival last month, the former Kumari was wheeled around on a chariot pulled by devotees. The Kumari always wears red, pins up her hair in topknots, and has a “third eye” painted on her forehead.

The weeklong Indra Jatra festival was the first of a series of celebrations in October including Dashain, the main festival, and Tihar or Diwali, the Festival



GIRL GODDESS. Nepal’s newly appointed living goddess, Kumari Aryatara Shakya, is carried toward Kumari Ghar, the temple palace where she will reside in Kathmandu, Nepal. (AP Photo/Niranjana Shrestha)

years old, left from a rear entrance on a palanquin carried by her family and supporters. She became the living goddess in 2017.

Families of the Shakya clan who qualify for the prestigious seat compete to have their daughters selected. The family of the Kumari gains an elevated position in society and within their own clan.

But Kumaris live a sequestered life. They have few selected playmates and are allowed outside only a few times a year for festivals.

Former Kumaris face difficulties adjusting to normal life, learning to do chores, and attending regular schools. Nepalese folklore says men who marry a former Kumari will die young, which has resulted in many of the girls remaining unmarried.

Over the past few years, there have been many changes in tradition and the Kumari is now allowed to receive an education from private tutors inside the temple palace and even have a television set.

The government also offers retired Kumaris a small monthly pension of about \$110, which is slightly above the minimum wage fixed by the government.

of Lights.

September 30 marked the eighth day of Dashain, a 15-day celebration of the victory of good over evil. Offices and schools were closed as people celebrated with their families.

Family, friends, and devotees paraded the new Kumari through the streets of Kathmandu before entering the temple palace, which will be her home for several years.

Devotees lined up to touch the girl’s feet

with their foreheads, the highest sign of respect among Hindus in the Himalayan nation, and offered her flowers and money.

“She was just my daughter yesterday, but today she is a goddess,” her father Ananta Shakya said, adding that there were already signs she would be the goddess before her birth. “My wife during pregnancy dreamed that she was a goddess and we knew she was going to be someone very special.”

The former Kumari Trishna Shakya, 11

Australia warns social media platforms against age verification for all ahead of a ban on children

By Rod McGuirk
The Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Australian authorities say social media platforms should not demand age verification for all account holders starting in December, when a ban on children under 16 having accounts goes into effect in the country. The government released guidelines on how platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, Snapchat, Reddit, X, and Instagram should apply the world’s first ban on children using social media, which begins December 10. It says verifying the ages of all account holders would be unreasonable.

“We think it would be unreasonable if platforms reverified everyone’s age,” said Australia’s eSafety commissioner Julie Inman Grant, who drafted the guidelines. Her use of the word “reverified” suggested the platforms usually already had sufficient data to verify a user was older than 16.

She said the platforms have “targeting technology” to focus on those under 16.

“They can target us with deadly precision when it comes to advertising. Certainly they can do this around the age of a child,” she added.

Australia’s parliament enacted the ban

last year, giving the platforms a year to work out its implementation. The platforms face fines of up to 50 million Australian dollars (\$33 million) for systemic failures to prevent children younger than 16 from holding accounts.

Critics of the legislation fear that banning young children from social media will impact the privacy of all users who must establish they are older than 16.

Inman Grant said claims the ban would see every Australian account holder subjected to age verification as a “scare tactic.”

Communications minister Anika Wells said the government seeks to keep platform users’ data as private as possible.

“These social media platforms know an awful lot about us” already, Wells said. “If you have been on, for example, Facebook since 2009, then they know you are over 16. There is no need to verify.”

Inman Grant said the platforms would need to demonstrate to her agency that they were taking “reasonable steps” to exclude children younger than 16.

“We don’t expect that every under-16 account is magically going to disappear on December 10,” Inman Grant said. “What we will be looking at is systemic failures to apply the technologies, policies, and processes.”

Melbourne’s RMIT University expert on information sciences Lisa Given told Australian Broadcasting Corp. that the government’s approach acknowledges that age verification technologies make errors.

“It’s going to be up to each of the platforms to determine how they’re going to comply and it will be interesting to see if they test the limits of the definition of ‘reasonable steps,’” Given said.



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AP senior videojournalist Raf Wober contributed to this report.

Thousands evacuated in Hong Kong after discovery of large WWII-era bomb

HONG KONG (AP) — Thousands of people were evacuated from their homes in Hong Kong in September so experts could defuse a large U.S.-made bomb left over from World War II that was discovered at a construction site.

Police said the bomb was nearly 5 feet in length and weighed about 1,000 pounds. It was discovered by construction workers in Quarry Bay, a bustling residential and business district on the west side of Hong Kong island.

“We have confirmed this object to be a bomb dating back to World War II,” said Andy Chan Tin-Chu, a police official, speaking to reporters ahead of the operation. He said that because of “the exceptionally high risks associated with

its disposal,” approximately 1,900 households involving 6,000 individuals were “urged to evacuate swiftly.”

The operation to deactivate the bomb took about a half a day. No one was injured in the operation.

Bombs left over from World War II are discovered from time to time in Hong Kong.

The city was occupied by Japanese forces during the war, when it became a base for the Japanese military and shipping. The United States, along with other Allied forces, targeted Hong Kong in air raids to disrupt Japanese supply lines and infrastructure.