

The Taleju Temple in Basantapur, Kathmandu Durbar Square, is not just a religious monument but also a place deeply intertwined with legends and stories that have shaped its historical significance. Built in 1564 by King Mahendra Malla, the temple is dedicated to Taleju Bhawani, the powerful goddess of the Malla dynasty, whose protection was believed to be essential for the kingdom's prosperity. Stories and Legends of the Taleju Temple includes as shown :

1. The Vision of King Mahendra Malla: One of the most popular stories surrounding the temple involves King Mahendra Malla, who was a devout worshipper of Taleju Bhawani. According to legend, the goddess appeared to the king in a dream in the form of a beautiful woman. In this vision, she instructed him to build a temple in her honor and worship her as the protector of his kingdom. It is said that the king was so awed by the encounter that he followed her command, resulting in the construction of the grand Taleju Temple in Kathmandu Durbar Square.
2. Taleju's Game of Dice: Another widely told legend relates to the goddess appearing in human form to play dice with the Malla kings. It is said that Taleju Bhawani would regularly descend from the heavens and play dice (a traditional game known as Pasa) with the king in the palace. However, the goddess gave a stern warning that her divine form should never be revealed to anyone else. Once, King Mahendra Malla accidentally disclosed the goddess's visits to a palace servant. Angered by the breach of secrecy, Taleju Bhawani vowed never to appear again in person. As a result, the king constructed the temple as a way to atone and continue the worship of the goddess.
3. The Connection to the Kumari: Another fascinating story ties the Kumari, the living goddess of Nepal, to the Taleju Temple. The selection and worship of the Kumari, who is regarded as an earthly incarnation of Taleju Bhawani, are deeply rooted in the temple's traditions. According to the legend, after the goddess ceased her physical visits to the palace, she chose to reside within the chosen Kumari. The Taleju Bhawani's spiritual essence is believed to transfer into the Kumari until she reaches puberty, after which a new Kumari is selected. The Kumari plays a critical role during the Indra Jatra festival, where she makes a ceremonial visit to the Taleju Temple, reinforcing the sacred connection.
4. The Secret Mantra and Royal Rule: The Taleju Temple was not only a place of worship but also held political and spiritual significance for the Malla kings. It is said that the goddess imparted a secret mantra to the Malla rulers, which they believed guaranteed the continuity of their reign. This mantra was passed from one king to his successor on his deathbed. The divine power associated with the mantra is thought to have symbolized the unbreakable bond between the goddess and the royal family. The construction of the temple, with its elaborate rituals, was believed to ensure that the goddess would always protect the kingdom as long as the kings remained devout.
5. The Festival of Dashain and Sacrifices: During

the Dashain festival, Taleju Bhawani is celebrated as a fierce and powerful protector. The festival brings thousands of devotees to the temple, where animal sacrifices are made in her honor. According to ancient beliefs, the sacrifices of buffaloes, goats, and ducks are meant to appease the goddess and receive her blessings for prosperity and protection. This practice is tied to a legend in which the goddess herself demanded these offerings to rid the kingdom of evil spirits.

6. The Restricted Access and the Hidden Idol: Another mysterious aspect of the Taleju Temple involves its restricted access. Only select priests and the royal family were historically allowed inside the inner sanctum where the idol of Taleju Bhawani is enshrined. The idol of the goddess is believed to be so powerful that it can only be seen by a few chosen individuals. According to legend, the temple's doors open to the public only once a year during Dashain, as a way to allow the people to receive the goddess's blessings without disrupting her sacred space.

7. The Mysterious Fires: Historical records indicate that the Taleju Temple has been struck by fire multiple times throughout the centuries, each time leading to speculation that these events were either acts of divine wrath or tests of faith from the goddess herself. One of the most destructive fires occurred in the 19th century, but each time the temple was faithfully rebuilt by the people, believing it was essential to restore Taleju's house to keep her protection over Kathmandu Valley intact. These stories and legends surrounding the Taleju Temple not only highlight its importance as a religious monument but also underscore its role as a political and cultural symbol for the Malla dynasty and the people of Nepal. Through these tales, the temple continues to inspire reverence and awe, preserving its place as a powerful center of devotion in the Kathmandu Valley.

Historical Significance of the temple are

1. Malla Dynasty: The Taleju Temple was constructed during the reign of King Mahendra Malla as a symbol of the royal family's devotion to Taleju Bhawani, a goddess believed to provide divine protection to the Malla kings and their kingdom.
2. Dashain Festival: The temple is opened to the public only once a year during the Dashain festival, allowing thousands of worshippers to enter for special rituals and offerings. The rest of the year, the temple remains closed, except for select priests and the royal family.
3. Royal Connection: The Malla kings revered Taleju Bhawani as their tutelary deity, and the temple's exclusive access was a reflection of the close connection between the monarchy and the goddess.

Architectural Features are

Pagoda Style: The temple is a striking example of Newari pagoda architecture, with multiple tiers of roofs and a gilded sikhara-style finial at the top. The pagoda's design is both aesthetically grand and structurally intricate, adorned with wooden carvings and metalwork.

Decorative Struts: The struts supporting the temple's roofs are carved with depictions of Hindu deities and

mythical creatures, providing both structural support and spiritual significance. **Restricted Access:** Only Hindus are allowed to enter the temple's innermost sanctum. Non-Hindus and tourists can appreciate the temple's grand architecture from the outside but are not permitted inside. **Unique Elements are** **Kumari Connection:** A special connection exists between the Taleju Temple and the Kumari, the living goddess of Nepal, who is considered an earthly incarnation of Taleju Bhawani. The Kumari is involved in rituals at the temple during Dashain, further linking the temple to the royal traditions of Nepal. **Symbol of Power:** The temple is not just a religious structure but also a symbol of the power and protection that the goddess Taleju Bhawani provided to the Malla kings. The Taleju Temple at Basantapur remains a sacred space and a critical piece of Kathmandu's historical and spiritual heritage, continuing to play an important role in religious ceremonies and festivals, particularly Dashain. Taleju Bhawani's connection to the Malla kings is further highlighted by another legend. It is said that the goddess played dice with the last Malla king, Jayaprakash Malla, under the condition that no one would witness their games. When the queen accidentally saw them, the goddess left in anger, declaring that she would only be found among high-caste Newar girls, thus linking the Taleju temple to the Kumari, the living goddess of Nepal. The temple holds significant political and cultural value as well. It is believed that the temple was constructed in the shape of a 'yantra,' a mystical diagram with spiritual powers, as per the goddess's suggestion. The temple also plays a key role during the Dashain festival, when thousands of devotees gather for rituals and sacrifices. Legend has it that the goddess herself demanded sacrifices of buffaloes and goats to protect the kingdom from evil forces. This practice continues, especially on the Ashtami (eighth day of Dashain), when large-scale animal sacrifices are made. Historically, the temple was so revered that King Mahendra Malla decreed no other building in Kathmandu could be taller than its gilded roof, symbolizing its supremacy. Despite being closed for most of the year, the temple remains a powerful cultural and religious symbol, reinforcing the connection between the divine protector and the rulers of Nepal. When the Malla Kingdom was later overtaken by the Shah rulers, they adopted Taleju Bhawani as their own royal deity, solidifying her importance not only in the religious life of the kingdom but also in legitimizing the new rulers' reign. Surrounding the main temple are 12 smaller temples, enhancing the complex's sacred aura, with the Kumari, believed to be a manifestation of Taleju, playing a critical role in the temple's ongoing spiritual traditions. Taleju Bhawani is a revered and powerful goddess in Nepalese history, closely associated with the Malla and Shah dynasties. She holds a significant position as the royal tutelary deity (Kul Devta) of these rulers, symbolizing protection, power, and divine guidance. Taleju

Bhawani is considered a fierce manifestation of the goddess Durga and is worshipped as the protector of the kingdom and the monarchy. Taleju Bhawani was believed to play an active role in the lives of the Malla rulers, providing them with spiritual guidance and divine protection. One popular legend recounts how Taleju Bhawani would descend to the palace to play a traditional dice game known as Tripasa (Pasa) with the Malla kings. However, the goddess warned that her visits must remain secret. When King Mahendra Malla accidentally revealed the divine encounters, Taleju Bhawani withdrew from the palace. To atone for this breach, the king built the Taleju Temple in her honor. This story reflects the deep personal and spiritual bond the Malla kings felt with Taleju Bhawani. They regarded her as the ultimate protector of their reign, and their authority was believed to be derived from her divine blessings.

**Role of Kumari and Royal Rituals:** The Taleju Temple is closely connected to the Kumari, the living goddess of Nepal. The Kumari, considered an incarnation of Taleju Bhawani, plays a central role during religious ceremonies held at the temple, especially during the Dashain festival. The temple is one of the key places where the Kumari is worshipped, and her presence reinforces the spiritual connection between the royal family, the goddess, and the people. The Kumari is selected from among high-caste Newar girls, specifically from the Shakya clan, who are Buddhists by tradition but are revered as the Hindu goddess Taleju once chosen. The selection process is rigorous, guided by Tantric priests who search for a girl with specific physical attributes and spiritual qualities, as she is believed to be the living embodiment of Taleju Bhawani until she reaches puberty. One of the legends suggests that Taleju Bhawani herself resides in the body of the Kumari, maintaining her protective presence on Earth after she stopped appearing to the Malla kings.

In Nepal, a Kumari is a prepubescent girl selected from the Shakya clan of the Nepali Newari Buddhist community. The Kumari is also revered and worshipped by some of the country's Hindus. While there are several Kumaris throughout Nepal, with some cities having several, the best known is the Royal Kumari of Kathmandu, and she lives in the Kumari Ghar, a palace in the center of the city. The selection process for her is especially rigorous. As of 2023, the Royal Kumari of Kathmandu is Trishna Shakya, aged five, installed in September 2017. The worship of the goddess in a young girl represents the worship of divine consciousness spread all over the creation. As the supreme goddess is thought to have manifested this entire cosmos out of her womb, she exists equally in animate as well as inanimate objects. While worship of an idol represents the worship and recognition of supreme through inanimate materials, worship of a human represents veneration and recognition of the same supreme in conscious beings. In the Shakta text *Devi Mahatmyam*, or *Chandi*, the goddess is said to have declared

that she resides in all female living beings in this universe. The entire ritual of Kumari is based on this verse. But while worshipping a goddess, only a young girl is chosen over a mature woman because of their inherent purity and chastity. Whilst the veneration of a living Kumari in Nepal is relatively recent, dating only from the 17th century, the tradition of Kumari-Puja, or virgin worship, has been around for much longer. There is evidence of virgin worship taking place in Nepal for more than 2,300 years. It appears to have taken hold in Nepal in the 6th century. There is written evidence describing the selection, ornamentation, and worship of the Kumari dating from the 13th century CE. There are several legends telling how the current tradition of the Kumari began. Most of the legends, however, involve the tale of King Jayaprakash Malla, the last Nepalese king of the Malla Dynasty (12th–17th century CE). According to the most popular legend, a king and his friend, the goddess Taleju, approached his chambers late one night as he played tripasa, a dice game. The goddess came along every night to play the game with the condition that the king refrains from telling anyone about their meetings. One night, the king's wife followed him to his chamber in order to find out who the king was meeting so often. The king's wife saw Taleju, and the goddess was angered. She told the king that if he wanted to see her again or have her protect his country, he would have to search for her among the Newari (Shakya) community of Ratnawali, as she would be incarnated as a little girl among them. Hoping to make amends with his patroness, King Jayaprakash Malla left the palace in search of the young girl who was possessed by Taleju. Similarly, there is another story about the disappearance of Taleju. Some believe that the goddess visited King Trailokya Malla every night in the human form. Like other legendary stories, the king and the goddess played tripasa (dice) while discussing the welfare of the country. However, one night, King Trailokya Malla made sexual advances towards the goddess Taleju. As a result, the goddess in rage stopped visiting the palace. The king in regret worshiped and pleaded for her return. Finally, the goddess agreed to appear in the body of a virgin girl from the Shakya family. Even today, a mother's dream of a red serpent is believed to be a portent of the elevation of her daughter to the position of Royal Kumari. And each year, the Nepalese King seeks the blessing of the Royal Kumari at the festival of Indra Jatra. This tradition has changed from 2008 A.D. with the country becoming one of the youngest republics in the world. A variation of this and other legends names King Gunkam Dev, a 12th-century ancestor of King Jayaprakash Malla, as the main character rather than Jayaprakash Malla. A third variation of the legend says that during the reign of King Jayaprakash Malla, a young girl was banished from the city because it was feared that she was possessed by the goddess Durga. When the queen learned of the young girl's fate, she became

enraged and insisted that the king fetch the girl and install her as the living incarnation of Durga. Once Taleju has left the sitting Kumari, there is a frenzy of activity to find her successor. The selection process is conducted by five senior Buddhist Vajracharya priests, the Panch Buddha, the Bada Guruju or Chief Royal Priest, Achajau, the priest of Taleju and the royal astrologer. The king and other religious leaders that might know of eligible candidates are also informed that a search is underway. Eligible girls are from the Newar Shakya caste of silver and goldsmiths. She must be in excellent health, never have shed blood or been afflicted by any diseases, be without blemish, and must not have yet lost any teeth. Girls who pass these basic eligibility requirements are examined for the battis lakshanas, or thirty-two perfections of a goddess. Some of these are poetically listed as such: A neck like a conch shell, A body like a banyan tree, Eyelashes like a cow, Thighs like a deer, Chest like a lion, Voice as soft and clear as a duck's. In addition to this, her hair and eyes should be very black, and she should have dainty hands and feet, small and well-recessed sexual organs, and a set of twenty teeth. The girl is also observed for signs of serenity and fearlessness, and her horoscope is examined to ensure that it is complementary to the king's. It is important that there not be any conflicts, as she must confirm the king's legitimacy each year of her divinity. Her family is also scrutinized to ensure its piety and devotion to the king. Once the priests have chosen a candidate, she must undergo yet more rigorous tests to ensure that she indeed possesses the qualities necessary to be the living vessel of Durga. Her greatest test comes during the Hindu festival of Dashain, also known as Vijaya Dashami. On the Kalaratri, or "black night", 108 buffaloes and goats are sacrificed to the goddess Kali. The young candidate is taken into the Taleju temple and released into the courtyard, where the severed heads of the animals are illuminated by candlelight and masked men are dancing about. If the candidate truly possesses the qualities of Taleju, she shows no fear during this experience. If she does, another candidate is brought in to attempt the same thing. In the next test, the living goddess must spend a night alone in a room among the heads of ritually slaughtered goats and buffaloes without showing fear. The fearless candidate has proven that she has the serenity and the fearlessness that typifies the goddess who is to inhabit her. After passing all other tests, the final test is that she must be able to pick out the personal belongings of the previous Kumari from an assortment of things laid out before her. If she is able to do so, there is no remaining doubt that she is the chosen one. There are claims contrary to the commonly believed ritual and screening process, however. The ex-Royal Kumari Rashmila Shakya states in her autobiography, *From Goddess to Mortal*, that this has nothing to do with the selection process, but rather is a ritual the Royal Kumari goes through each

year, that there are no men dancing around in masks trying to scare her, and that at most, there are only a dozen or so decapitated animal heads in the scary room test. She also describes the requisite physical examination of each Kumari as neither intimate nor rigorous. Once the Kumari is chosen, she must be purified so that she can be an unblemished vessel for Taleju. She is taken by the priests to undergo a number of secret Tantric rituals to cleanse her body and spirit of her past experiences. Once these rituals are completed, Taleju enters her, and she is presented as the new Kumari. She is dressed and made up as a Kumari and then leaves the Taleju temple and walks across the square on a white cloth to the Kumari Ghar, which will be her home for the duration of her divinity.