

# Monthly stigma: The practice of 'chhaupadi' in Nepal

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It's a small house, a hut or a cowshed, a little away from the houses of Ruga village, in the heart of Mugu, one of Nepal's most remote districts hidden in the Himalayas. The roof is so low that an adult struggles to stand up; the entrance is so small that the sunlight barely finds its way in. In summer the rain pierces the roof and the snakes crawl inside. In winter, the cold is cutting.

The tradition of chhaupadi isolation continues unabated in Western Nepal. In the local language, "chhau" refers to menstruation, "padi" to women. This practice stems from the belief that when she has her periods, the woman is "impure" and could "pollute" and "contaminate" the household by remaining there during her menstruations. So, once a month, during the entire length of their menstruation, women are banished to the chhaupadi goth, which they can only leave once their periods are over. Women who have just given birth are equally considered "untouchable" and go and join their fellow chhaupadis with their newborn babies in the goth for 11 days. Sometimes the goths welcoming the chhaupadis are former cowsheds. Often, they still shelter cattle and the women have to coexist with the buffaloes, separated from them only by a summary partition.

Practices and taboos surrounding menstruation vary according to the region, the community, the village, and are not confined to Nepal. In the strictest observance of chhaupadi, women are prevented from looking at the sun, interacting with males and cattle, drinking dairy products and dealing with their daily chores. Scholars Kandel, Bhandari, and Lamichanne have listed the scourges threatening the community and the family of women who do not abide by the tradition: "she could become sick or die; her bones could break; she could become infertile; others could fall ill or even die. She will become sexually dangerous and harm would come to any partners' genitals and person could not have sex and could be harmful to family members, village etc if the seclusion is broken." Furthermore, if they "touch the fruit trees, the fruits will fall before they are ripe or the fruits will be dry; if they fetch water, the well will dry up; if the cattle are fed or milked by Chhaupadi, blood will come out of their teats instead of milk." (1)

Families who break the tradition are pushed away from their village or community. Last year the story of Gagan B K made headlines because he decided his wife would stay home during her period, aware of the dangers that face women confined to the goth. The couple was ostracized by his community and banished from all social gatherings and celebrations. (2) Gagan's parents also took part in the ostracization, refusing to eat the food prepared by his wife. In August 2011, the newspapers reported the story of a 19-year-old girl forced to deliver her baby in the cowshed, and thereafter severely beaten up with nettles by other women because she stepped out of the goth only a few hours after giving birth.

Even if all communities do not force isolation upon their menstruating women, the discrimination and prejudice against them remains strong, even in Nepal's capital city, Kathmandu. During a study conducted in Nepalese schools by Wateraid in 2009, only 11 percent of the respondents declared not practicing any form of restriction or exclusion during menstruation. (3) For instance, during their period women are often banned from the kitchen and eat separately. Mothers may instruct their daughters not to walk near a temple or not to look at herself in the mirror to avoid bad omens.

The impact of chhaupadi on women's health is obviously devastating. Five days a month, the women are confined to a dark, dirty room without nutritious food in sufficient quantity. Every year, newspapers report stories of women raped, killed by wild animals, bitten by snakes or dead of cold during their stay in the goth. The consequences are even more extreme for women who have to give birth and stay there for days with their newborn. In 2008, there were 281 deaths due to complications during the delivery for 100,000 live births in Nepal. This figure, which according to numerous experts is probably largely underestimated, represents a considerable progress up from a maternal mortality rate of 539 for 100,000 recorded in 1996; yet it remains one of the highest in Asia. The neonatal mortality rate (during the 28 days following the birth) reaches 32 for 1000 live births and a lot of newborns succumb to pneumonia or diarrhea after living their first days in a cowshed. (4) The lack of appropriate care during delivery to prevent post-natal difficulties also partly accounts for the high prevalence of uterine prolapse, which has made the lives of 600,000 Nepalese women hellish, according to the United Nations Population Funds data. (5)

In addition to the sanitary consequences, such discriminatory traditions slow down women's emancipation process, which Nepal has embarked upon with tremendous difficulties since the end of the conflict. On one hand, the girls' education, key to the empowerment of Nepalese women, suffers from their absence five days a month, including during exams. On the other hand, by stigmatizing women's natural cycle as impure, society locks them up through numerous restrictions controlling their bodies and restraining the scope of their engagement in the community. Their potential for action, participation and innovation is constrained through this stigma and shame. Locking up women's bodies is also an attempt to lock up their minds.

The end of discrimination against women and the dismantling of the patriarchal society have counted among the main demands of the Maoist insurgency, and have fuelled women's participation in the guerilla movement. While the conflict has at least allowed ending discrimination against women to be included in the political agenda, the ground progress has been slow. In 2005 the Supreme Court declared the practice of chhaupadi as illegal, and the government designed a protocol aiming at its eradication in 2009. Nevertheless, the main part of the awareness-raising and educational work lies upon the shoulder of women's NGOs.

We should keep in mind that through its adhesion to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, Nepal is mandated to "modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women". If pointing fingers at the lack of education and awareness fuelling the chhaupadi system and demanding a "change of mindset" constitute the easy part, designing a comprehensive strategy of modification of those models of conducts and the structure of society in order to undermine the practice's root causes has proven a much bigger challenge.

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#### **Footnotes:**

1. "Chhue, Chhaupadi and Chueekula Pratha" – Menstrual Sheds: Examples of Discriminatory Practices against Women in the Mid- and Far-Western Regions of Nepal: Considering Women as "Impure" or

“Unclean” During Menstruation and Post-Partum Periods, Nirmal Kandel, MBBS, M.A, Amir Raj Bhandari, LLB, MBA, Jaya Lamichanne, MA, available at : <http://drnirmal.tripod.com/Journal1.pdf>

2. ‘Whole family ostracized for shunning Chhaupadi’, Ekantipur, 3 February 2010, Doti District, available online at: <http://www.ekantipur.com/2010/02/03/national/whole-family-ostracised-for-shunningchhaupadi/307614.html>

3. [http://www.wateraid.org/documents/plugin\\_documents/wa\\_nep\\_mhm\\_rep\\_march2009.pdf](http://www.wateraid.org/documents/plugin_documents/wa_nep_mhm_rep_march2009.pdf)

4. ‘NEPAL: Maternal, neonatal mortality “too high”’, 3 February 2009, IRIN, <http://irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=82714>

5. ‘Fallen Wombs, Broken Lives: Responding to Uterine Prolapse in Nepal’, 3 August 2009, United Nations Populations Fund, <http://www.unfpa.org/public/News/pid/3282>