

Menstruation Pollution Taboos and Gender Based Violence in Western Nepal

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Abstract

Menstruating women practicing Chaupadi (Menstrual pollution taboos practice) in western Nepal are banished from home, restricted to eat nutritious food, treated as untouchables to partake in social activities under the constant fear of disasters in the family if this tradition is breached. Supported by Hindu religious, cultural and orthodox patriarchal gender norms of womanhood, this tradition has negatively influenced human rights, health and safety of women and has augmented the process of gender based violence in Nepali society.

Keywords: Ritual Pollution, Violent practice, Patriarchal

Introduction

The biological and social-cultural comprehension of issues and problems embedded with gender and sexuality differs according to societies and cultures. Social-cultural norms and practices explaining gender and sexuality are deeply entrenched in every level of society, and frequently influence the human rights, the decisions of legislative and judicial bodies, law enforcement, and health care services. Human rights initiatives have increasingly encompassed sexuality, gender, and issues surrounding these topics (FWLD, 2007). However, the problem of menstruation discriminations remains grim because all societies do not treat menstruation as natural biological phenomena because of the perceived ritual uncleanness of menstruation. Anthropologist Douglas (1966) argues that the concept of *Pure* and *Ritual uncleanness* (impure) exists in every society and pollution beliefs can be of relative categories. What is clean in relation to one thing may be

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unclean in relation to another and vice versa. For example, in many cultures common pollution beliefs is that menstrual blood is polluting hence menstruating women are debarred from various kinds of social and religious activities. Linked with numerous misconceptions, myths, superstitions, ill practices and even celebrations throughout different societies, menstruation, in practice is more social and cultural than a biological process. Sociologist Durkheim (1898) argued that human religion in its entirety emerged originally in connection with menstruation and a flow of blood periodically ruptured relations between sexes. As it is terrible hence all sorts of cultural taboos are instituted to prevent contact with it. During menstruation, females would exercise a type of repulsing action which keeps the other sex far from them.

In her study on rural Hindu women from a village in Tamil Nadu India, Kapadia (1995) assert that though the women in South India have more power and higher status in comparison to the North which is severely patriarchal, still the menstruating women in South India are considered filthy and are alienated from the rest of her family, by prohibiting physical intimacy. She rejects conventional claims that the villages are characterized by a deep-seated cultural consensus shaped by dominant groups. Her argument was that oppressed women groups produce distinctive cultural representation to create for themselves a normative world in which they have dignity, self-respect and power. Contrary to this, in the name of menstruation pollution, Hindu high caste Brahmin-Chhetri women and girls in many remote Hindu villages of Nepal are exposed to a variety of forms of violence (SAATHI, 1997; WOREC, 2002; Deuba et al. 2005; Puri et. al., 2012). Owing to bizarre practices and taboos of menstruation, women live undignified, disrespectful and powerless lives and are subject to violation of human rights, numerous gynecological and infection problems. Bennett (1983) in her study on Hindu women of Nepal looks at the ways in which the social and symbolic roles of high-caste (Brahmin-Chhetri) Nepali women combine to define their position in patrilineal Hindu society. She delineated the themes of cultural opposition and provided the framework of analysis- purity versus pollution, asceticism versus fertility, articulated through the symbolic conception of female body and female reproductive process. Ingrained in the concepts of purity versus pollution, menstrual stigma and taboos are manifestations of wider gender and social relations. Though menstruation is natural, it becomes the subject of various religious, cultural and gendered discriminative norms concerning purity, decency, responsibilities, taboos and stigma that manifest in the loss of gender rights and human lives.

Entrenched in values of asceticism and purity, menstrual taboos practice known as *Chaupadi* (in local lexis) hut practice, is prevalent in far west and some parts of mid-west region in Nepal in Achham, Bajura, Kailali, Doti, and Bajhang districts (administrative division) among all castes and groups of Hindus; more severe among the Brahmin and Chhetri castes. Menstruating females in these districts are considered impure ritually. It is believed that the gods and goddesses become infuriated if a woman stays at home during menstruation. Under this belief women and girls are considered as impure and polluted during their period of menstruation and child birth and prohibited to live inside the home and kept out of touch and face various social restrictions. There is a legend related to its origin. According to Hindu religious myths, *Indra*, the King of Heaven was accused for his sins viz. killing a Brahmin (High caste Hindu) and having illicit sexual acts with women during his quest. Hence, to repent his sin, all women were said to be punished through menstruation and menstrual taboos.

Despite a ban imposed by the Supreme Court of Nepal on *Chaupadi* in 2005 and the Ministry of Child and Social Welfare's guidance in 2008 and strict laws to eradicate *Chaupadi*, this practice endures. In recent years Nepal has witnessed drastic political changes -people's movement for multi-party democracy and democratic constitution of 1990, Maoist insurgency and popular movement of 2006, state transformation into democratic republic, Constitutions of 2006 and 2015 - that ensured equal rights to all citizens. However, large bulk of female population from remote regions still survives in nastiest conditions during menstruation despite all changes. Baskota et al. (2001) argued that Nepali Maoist models for women's empowerment negotiate between overarching Maoist ideologies and the existing particularities of gender discrimination in Nepali society. However, there are noticeable gaps between rhetoric and practice. The fundamental changes in gender relations that the Maoists assert may not be the intentional result of their policies, but rather the largely consequences of the conflict that emerge in relation to the existing socio-cultural practices and forms of gender discriminations.

Upriya and Bhandari (2010) argue that among all the cultural practices that oppress Nepali women, none is as degrading as the *Chaupadi* culture. This practice has negatively affected health/reproductive health and safety of adolescent girls. *Chaupadi* is one of the reasons for increasing cases of uterus prolepses and poor reproductive health of women and girls. This practice directly affects adolescent girls and women as well as their children because women bring their babies to the *Chaupadi Goth* (huts/sheds) where they

have to stay during their menstruation. As the powerless, meaningless, entrenched, callous and voiceless condition of women is reflected in *Chaupadi* tradition hence, the issue of *Chaupadi* is needed to be studied to look at the situation of women from the vantage point of human rights, health and safety in a region which is extremely remote and socially and economically very least developed. Hence, the prime objective of this paper is to explore how the notion of menstruation pollution in the form of *Chaupadi* hut practice has augmented the process of gender based violence in patriarchal culture of discrimination and how this has impinged on the human rights, health and safety of women in Far-West Nepal.

Methodologically, the study takes a qualitative approach. Fieldwork took place in Bhagyaswori Village Development Committee (VDC) a remote rural hilly village with 242 households and a population of 1091. This village is located in Achham district which is a hilly district of Far-Western Development Region (FWDR) in Far-West Nepal where *Chaupadi* hut culture practice is deeply rooted. Achham district, a part of *Seti* zone which is one of the fourteen zones of Nepal, with its district headquarters at Mangelsen, is one of the 75 districts of Nepal. This district is one of the remotest, backward and least developed districts of Nepal in terms of human development indicators and ranks 72th position in overall composite index, 74th in poverty deprivation index, 75th in socioeconomic and infrastructural index, and 68th in women's empowerment index and 73rd in gender discrimination index out of 75 districts of Nepal. The district accounts high discriminatory practices (*Chaupadi* hut practice) against women during menstruation and therefore has been chosen as study district. According to Achham District Women's Development Officer, more than 95% women in this district are practicing discriminatory *Chaupadi* practices despite the Awareness Programme and legal measures against *Chaupadi*.

This study uses qualitative descriptive study design in which women aged 15-49 within the reproductive age was the universe of the study. At the first stage of sampling, household listing was done to identify the eligible respondents within the designated area. After household listing, 190 women were found eligible. At the second stage, 32 Brahmin and Chhetri castes women (22 married and 10 unmarried) (17.0 percent of universe) were selected randomly as an ultimate sample for the study on the ground that menstruation pollution is more severe in these two Hindu groups. Only one woman from each household was chosen for interview. All respondents were requested to share feelings, experiences and practices since their menarche

to the date of survey. Data was collected by semi-structured individual interview (both closed and open-ended questions). Closed ended questions were used for the collection of household and individual information, while open ended questions were used to understand the menstrual practices. Three types of techniques: *case study*, *key informant interview* and *participant observation* were used to gather information. The measure of reliability was obtained by administering the same test twice over a period of time to the respondents. The scores from Time 1 and Time 2 were correlated in order to evaluate the test for stability over time. Physical condition of menstrual (*Chaupadi* hut) and the activities performed during menstrual period was studied through participant observation. Using a panel of key informants familiar with the construct was the way in which the validity was assessed. Out of 32 sampled women, 6 women participated for case study. Four key informants- school teacher, leader of women rights group, local health worker and Hindu priest were selected. The key informants were selected on the principles that most members of any society do not know the full repertoire of forms, meanings and functions of their culture as claimed by Sjoberg and Nett (1968). As such, key informants, as a result of their personal skills, or position within a society, are able to provide more information and a deeper insight into what is going on around them.

The field work for data collection was accomplished during October 1-24, 2016. The ease of access of the researcher to the field was difficult with tedious walk of hours (in rugged hills) from the district headquarters Mangelsen. There were various difficulties and challenges in carrying out interviews about such socially legitimate but legally illicit *violent practice*. The first challenge was to face and accept this *new* reality. Two local females and one male were chosen as research assistants for collecting field data. There were different gender challenges involved in carrying out fieldwork. In this part of the world, usually every morning and evening, men folk used to gather at local tea stalls for gossiping on current local issues and for sipping tea, and cultural norms are such that women of good character are expected to shun this. Such patriarchal notion of avoidance from males are taught and socialized to a girl child even before her marriage. These notions are not contested out of fear of disgrace, esteem loss, or because of internalization of these norms. These norms restrict women mobility and their interaction. Due to such norms young unmarried girls and brides virtually pulled out from interview sessions at first, but they were convinced by the research assistants. Understanding the local language was a problem which was solved with the

help of research assistants. Ethical approval in the form of verbal consent was obtained from each respondent before administering the interview and each respondent was convinced of the confidentiality of the identity of the respondents.

Menstrual Pollution as Gender Based Violence: Paradox of Powerful Goddess vs. Feeble Women

According to the population census of Nepal 2011, there are 26.5 million Hindus (81.3 percent Hindus), out of which 48.5 percent are male and 51.5 percent female. Despite this huge percentage of female population and gender rights embarked in Constitution, Hindu religious norms and taboos constrain the activities of women and there is often overt discrimination against the women. The unscientific practice of *Chaupadi* prohibits menstruating Hindu women in Bhagyaswori village to enter the house. They reside in *Chaupadi* huts for nine days when an adolescent girl has her first period, and five days for every following one. Menstruating females cannot enter or reside inside houses, and are not allowed to enter kitchen, temple, touch other person, livestock, green vegetables and plants, or fruits.

There are altogether 45 *Chaupadi Goth* or sheds/huts in the study area. Fourteen huts were randomly selected to observe their physical conditions. These mud-walled huts about twice the size of a standard doghouse are outbuildings far from their homes (20-25 meter far) aside of cow/buffalo sheds. Huts are in the form of small size rooms. Many of the huts are dilapidated, narrow, tight and congested. The mean length, breadth and height of the huts were 208.6 (SD± 54.5), 130.9 (SD± 30.1) and 125.4 (SD±21.6) centimeters respectively. There was no door in many huts and they were open. In those huts with doors, the average size of door was very small. Neither of the huts had a single window and any means of ventilation. Almost all huts were not only unfit for human dwelling in terms of their physical condition, but also unhygienic and unsafe. Due to small size, the women were unable to sleep comfortably. During rainy seasons, water seeps from the roof of the huts. On an average, about four menstruating women were compelled to be sheltered within each hut because there are only 47 *Chaupadi* huts for 242 households. Under the constant fear of rape and assaults by drunkards, attack of wild animals (leopard, fox, wolf), snake and scorpion bite, women prefer staying in group for safety. A school teacher (key informant) informed that few *Chaupadi* huts were destroyed under the pressure of Maoist insurgents during more than a decade long Maoist

insurgency (1994-2006). However, in many cases elderly women following the suggestions of local priests built the huts and started using them again.

Menstruation, Fear of Gods and Religion: Historically *Chaupadi* is integral to practice of Hinduism in Nepal that defines the idea of femininity and woman's role and responsibilities within the home. All women are supposed to possess four basic virtues: faithfulness, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness. Menstruation as a tradition insists faithfulness on the part of menstruating women by obediently following the *Chaupadi* traditions without questioning its consequences. In Hindu pantheon, goddesses are regarded powerful and pure. Regarded as the root cause of creation, sustenance and annihilation, they are pure power (referred to *Shakti* in Hindu religious texts). It is believed that if the menstruating women touch sacred things and ascetic persons, then it brings disaster in the community. Religious prohibitions made the women believe from their teenage that if they fail to follow their monthly restrictions, the community has to face calamities, animal attacks, crop failures and droughts.

Menstruation and Prohibitions: Menstruating women were restricted to drink milk or eat milk products. Cows are regarded sacred and venerated in Hindu religion as mother goddess hence menstruating women are prohibited to touch them. The women practicing *Chaupadi* can only bathe or wash clothes in a *Chaupadi dhara*- which is separate well, stream or small rivulets near the village. Their access to water taps and wells is strictly restricted. They should only eat flatbread with salt, are deprived of nutritious food during periods and are not allowed to eat together with family members. The health implications of *Chaupadi* are severe. There is neither registered physician nor medicine in the Health posts. In the cases of snake and venomous scorpion bites, menstruating women have high chance of death because social taboo hinders their fast treatment keeping out them from people's touch. However, nowadays, owing to raising awareness and strict legal provisions against *Chaupadi*, in critical cases of illness or serious cases, now they are allowed to move outside and touch other people. They cannot read or write during their menstruation. It is the belief that *Saraswati*, the Hindu Goddess of education will be infuriated if women read, write, and touch books or go to school during her menstruation period. She is supposed to remain within the premises of *Chaupadi* hut. This domesticity results in girls' attendance at school being interrupted, increase the gap between girls and boys in education and augment discriminations over the long term. Many women employee miss offices five days every month during their menses. Women who rebuff

the custom must adhere to it because it's firmly entrenched in their patriarchal society and a violation is implausible.

Menstruation and Patriarchy: Dhakal (2008) argues that the Gender Based Violence (GBV) rooted in *Chaupadi*, is driven by social, cultural, religious and gender norms compounded by years of political conflict which has increased the risk of insecurity and violence. Menstruation subjects the women to a sort of imprisonment and banishment. This maltreatment of women is rooted in a patriarchal culture of discrimination that denies women equal status with men. Prevailing local social, cultural and Hindu religious norms identify women as the chattels of men, relate women's chastity with family reputation and hence legitimize discriminatory violence against women. Under the *Chaupadi* hut tradition, menstrual women are not allowed to attend to any guest and their movements inside and outside the home are restricted. Entrenched in patriarchic yokes, the women and girls spend all time for household chores that restrain them from getting education and awareness against *Chaupadi*. Nearly 89 percent respondents said that very few opportunities exist for them to obtain information and acquire skills and knowledge to fight against this inhuman tradition. Because of the patriarchal values that they have imbibed, even the elderly women, especially mother, mothers-in-law and elderly aunts compel the young women to follow *Chaupadi* practices strictly. If they dare to shatter the tradition, they are ostracized by the family and village.

Consequences of Chaupadi Practices: Based on her research on *Chaupadi* hut practice, Robinson (2015) has testified that during the winter in the mountain villages of Nepal, temperatures at night drop below freezing point. About 92 percent of women respondents claimed that there are often cases of women becoming critically ill owing to the horrific conditions of *Chaupadi* sheds where menstruating women are subjected to the cold extremities (heavy blankets are restricted) and dangerous risk of various infectious diseases. It was reported that out of 32 women, 9 married women suffer from prolepses. One key informant (local health worker) informed that poor nutrition during menstruation, lack of care in pregnancy and delivery are responsible for such cases. Many women and young girls die due to health problems caused by sleeping in dirty, cold conditions. Exposure, increased vulnerability to wild animals and snakebites, and higher risks of rape are just a few dangers faced by women practicing *Chaupadi*. There are also cases where the women become feeble because of diarrhea and respiratory diseases and also malnutrition. Of the menstruating females are

forced to wear strained unwashed cloths due to the lack of awareness on the use of sanitary pads.

Occasionally, they become victims of wild animals, snakes and scorpion bites. Alcoholics sometimes enter *Chaupadi* sheds secretly and sexually abuse, even molest the women staying there. Such incidents are hardly ever reported due to social stigma and women are the *silent sufferers*. Throughout the menstrual banishment period women are proscribed from involvement in cultural rituals. Eighty-eight percent women said that they do not attend any cultural ceremony as guest during menstruation. Likewise, 12 percent respondents reported that only in urgent cases they attend secretly and return back immediately. Of the respondents, 91 percent say that while practicing the *Chaupadi*, they experience the feelings of diffidence, insecurity, guilt and humiliation, as well as sadness and depression.

Conclusion

The government of Nepal has legally banned the practice of *Chaupadi*. Still due to factors like ignorance, superstitions, cultural norms and remoteness of the region, the practice is prevalent in different parts of Nepal. Religious and cultural meanings emanating from Hindu notions of pollution and purity have shaped the local society and the lives of menstruating women. Embedded within the religious notions of the virtues of womanhood-faithfulness, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness, the *Chaupadi* tradition insists on faithful adherence on the part of menstruating women to the conventions of *Chaupadi*. The practice has negatively influenced health, safety and human rights of women and has augmented the process of gender based violence in Nepali society.

With firmstate laws against *Chaupadi* and raising awareness of common village folks against the malevolence of this tradition, the attitudes regarding *Chaupadi* regulations are gradually changing, but this barbaric tradition continues to subsist in some form due to religious sanction. Hence, apart from the strict enforcement of the laws, peoples' awareness and resistance are essential to eliminate *Chaupadi*. Elimination of this tradition requires educating the local communities of the physical and psychologically detrimental effects of this practice. People's attitude (especially the women's attitudes) and beliefs need to be changed through education and awareness. Solutions lie in communication with the younger generation and empowerment of the women. Alongside legal and ethical awareness and enforcement at both micro (local) and macro (national) levels, it is necessary to impart

education and awareness about female biology, reproductive health and vulnerabilities of women during menstruation and delivery. Only when the empowered women realize menstruation as a normal organic phenomenon, this practice will subside easily.

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