



FEATURE

Bringing an end to deadly “menstrual huts” is proving difficult in Nepal

Late last year a 21 year old woman suffocated and died in a hut in Nepal where she had been sent to live while menstruating. **Rojita Adhikari** finds that the practice of chhaupadi still has local support

Rojita Adhikari *freelance journalist*

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Parbati Rawat was 21 years old when she died. “It was the 4th day of her period,” Parbati’s sister-in-law, Dambara Rawat, told *The BMJ*. “Normally, she would wake up early and go to the jungle to collect firewood or to the paddy field to work,” she said. But that morning Parbati didn’t join her sister-in-law. “I called her many times. She didn’t reply.”

Chhaupadi is a deeply rooted and centuries old Hindu practice used primarily in parts of far western and midwestern Nepal. It’s based on the belief that women and girls are impure, unclean, and untouchable during menstruation. When women have their periods, they are not allowed to do a range of everyday activities and are banished into “menstruation huts” to live and sleep.

The prevalence of chhaupadi is unknown, but a survey last year by researchers from the University of Bath and the Centre for Research on Environment, Health, and Population Activities (CREHPA) in Nepal gives an idea. The researchers surveyed 400 adolescent girls in villages in midwestern Nepal, the heart of the chhaupadi area. They did focus groups as well.¹

The survey showed that 60% of the girls knew chhaupadi was illegal, yet 77% practised it. The researchers found the practice was widely accepted in that area, even among people with higher levels of education. And there were clear mental health repercussions for the girls. “They were around 80% more likely to be experiencing depression,” says study co-author Mahesh Puri of CREHPA.

Parbati lived in the village of Dikrini. She had been married for 18 months and was a high school graduate. Dambara said Parbati loved her husband and was thinking of having a baby soon.

“When we broke down the door, she was just lying on the floor,” Dambara said. “It had been a cold night; Parbati made a fire in the corner of the hut, and suffocated.” Other women have died after being bitten by snakes or succumbing to the cold.

Nepal’s Supreme Court banned chhaupadi in 2005. In August 2018, the government added a criminal charge. Forcing a menstruating woman to go into a hut is now punishable by up to three months in jail and a 3000 Nepali rupee (£20; €24; \$26) fine.

But in Parbati’s small village, support for the practice remains. Police blamed Parbati’s brother-in-law Chhatra Rawat for encouraging her to use the hut, but his arrest brought sympathy. On a recent visit to the village, Parbati’s father-in-law expressed no grief about the death of his daughter-in-law; his wife wailed, saying her elder son had not committed any crime.

“Please bring back my son,” she cried.

“We have around 85 houses in this village,” said Kaushilya Budha, a 25 year old woman who graduated from high school. “All the women in this village stay in the hut while menstruating. We haven’t died. Parbati’s death is natural, it’s her fate. You can’t say her death is because she slept at the hut.”

“This is our belief. I’ve also experienced it. Once, I mistakenly entered my house during my period, then on the second day there were seven snakes around my house and my goat was killed by a tiger. So, we can’t even think about entering the house while menstruating. Forget about sleeping there,” Kaushilya said.

The hut where Parbati died is still standing. It’s small and windowless, made of mud and stone; at about three feet high, it’s too small to stand up in.

“It’s hard to change people’s minds”

Sita Budha, 40, the owner of the hut and a neighbour of Parbati, is now scared to stay in it. “There’s no other option than to stay at the hut,” she says. “God may be angry then punish us if we stay inside our homes. The police may arrest us if we stay at the hut. What do we do?”

Her husband is concerned as well. “God will punish us if we don’t practise chhaupadi carefully,” he said.

Women from other parts of Nepal don’t stay in huts during their period. When asked why only people here are punished, Budha’s husband had a ready answer.

“Our god is different and a bit more aggressive than ones in other parts of Nepal,” he said. He sees attention from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the police as a dig at a deep rooted cultural practice and blames foreign and local

NGOs for the arrest. "I know NGOs want to destroy our culture," he said.

Over the past 10 years, police have had reports of 14 women dying in chhaupadi huts in Achham district alone, mostly from suffocation or snake bite.

Chhatra Rawat's arrest was the first in Nepal under the chhaupadi law.

"We won't wait for women or girls to die at the hut. We will arrest those family members if we find someone staying at a hut," said Janak Bahadur Shahi, deputy superintendent of police of the district of Achham, where Parbati's village is.

The practice is deeply rooted in the region, said Bhojraj Shrestha, chief district officer of Achham. "There have been a lot of awareness programmes from the government and non-government sector but very few changes have happened. It's hard to change people's minds here," he said.

But there are exceptions

Budhinanda municipality in the Bajura district had the opposite reaction to Dikirin village, which is just south of Bajura in Achham. A little over a year ago, 32 year old Amba Bohora and her two sons, 12 year old Suresh and 9 year old Ramit, died in a hut.

Amba was in the fourth day of her period. After having dinner, she went to sleep at a hut 150 metres from her house. It was cold and snowing. Amba made a fire. Then she went to sleep with her two boys.

The next morning, Amba's sister Susmita knocked on the door with some tea and breakfast. "Nobody answered, then I called my mother-in-law as well as another neighbour. We broke down the door and found all of them dead," Susmita said.

"After that we destroyed the hut and started staying inside the house," she said. "Not only me, all the women and girls from our village now stay inside the house in menstruation."

For 13 year old Surakchya Bohora that means no more worries. "The best thing is that now I don't need to stay in a hut like my mother did," she said.

83 year old Rihule Bohora still believes in chhaupadi, but the deaths have affected him. "I've stopped telling my female family members to go and sleep in a hut after Amba's death. I've accepted this change because I don't want to see more women dying," he said.

Why the different reaction in the two villages? "It's difficult to say," Radha Paudel, founder of Global South Coalition for

Dignified Menstruation, told *The BMJ*. "It depends on individual people in the villages. Amba's village was perhaps more human, and Parbati's is rigid and unwilling to change its culture."

Change is slow

Prabat Gurung, Nepal's minister for women, children, and senior citizens, said chhaupadi is of great concern to the government. "Banishing women and girls in chhaupadi huts is a criminal act. We will punish all those who banish their women and girls."

He says the government is running an awareness programme and limiting financial support to villages where the practice still occurs. One village in Achham has set up a financial reward plan for women who reject chhaupadi.² But so far there are no measurements to determine if either approach is successful.

Activist Radha Paudel, who has been speaking out against chhaupadi for two decades, believes education and persuasion are better approaches than the threat of imprisonment. "The government and local and international NGOs should work on this matter together," she said.

"Nepali schools should start teaching our children that menstruation blood is not impure," she added. The current focus by local and international NGOs to distribute sanitary pads in rural areas won't have much of an effect on chhaupadi, she predicts. "Menstruation is a matter of dignity. If we're able to teach this, we can change this harmful practice in 10 to 15 years," she said.

Although some awareness programmes are currently up and running, she senses that change is slow. "I can see a 20% decrease in far western and midwestern villages," she said. "But most women and girls in those areas are still banished whether in a separate hut or a cowshed during their menstruation."

Gurung told *The BMJ* that the government is in it for the long haul. "We all know it can't be changed in people's minds overnight," he said. "It takes time."

I have read and understood BMJ policy on declaration of interests and have no relevant interests to declare.

- 1 EurekaAlert. Women in Nepal still forced to sleep outside in "menstruation huts". 9 December 2019. www.eurekaalert.org/pub_releases/2019-12/tfg-win120519.php.
- 2 Sharma G. Deaths prompt Nepal to offer cash to women who shun "menstrual huts". Reuters. 3 December 2019. www.reuters.com/article/us-nepal-women-menstruation/deaths-prompt-nepal-to-offer-cash-to-women-who-shun-menstrual-huts-idUSKBN1Y71VG.

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