

Negotiating pathways for the continuation of *chhaupadi* system in remote parts of Nepal¹

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Abstract

Chhaupadi system, the practice of menstrual segregation of women in separate sheds called chhaugoths, is rooted deeply in Mid-western and Far-western parts of Nepal since long ago. In spite of its evil status identified in society menstrual segregation has been witnessed continuing in traditional society. This study has been carried out in order to investigate negotiating pathways for the continuation of the evil practice, focusing the study to one of the representative traditionalist society called Patala in Kalikot district of Nepal. The respondents were comprised of 150 sample sizes consisting of menstruating women from various age group, religious persons, faith healers, activists, and aged people. The data collected showed the low literacy rate in this study site and all the families observed have made menstrual huts (chhaupadi goths). The main reason for the continuation of this evil practice of chhaupadi is it becomes a tradition for this area and the second most reason is the widespread illiteracy as found in this area shown by the data collected. God will get angry if they try to get rid of this practice, some of the respondents answered. Untouchability, restrictions, taboos, segregation resulting in humiliation, health risks, crimes and injustice have often been observed as violation in physical and mental health of women. The people of this area are fed up with this evil tradition. They are trying to get rid of this system but they cannot.

Key words: Chhaugoths; Chhaupadi system; Menstrual segregation; Negotiating pathways

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Introduction

Nepal is a geographically small South-Asian country situated between China and India, yet it is culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse country. In spite of the secular status constitutionally vast majority of Nepali population follow Hinduism and religion plays an important role in the life and conduct of the people in society. *Chaupadi pratha*, an evil tradition practiced for centuries that banishes females during their menstruation period from the houses, is one critical issue in remote areas. Not only it brought an ample of social violence in human society but also it has put women in danger or risk of their lives. It is a practice in which a girl, when her menstrual cycle started, has to leave her home and go for staying in menstrual huts made near home especially in *chhaupadi* period for at least five days counted from her first day of menstrual period. Kalikot, is one of the remote and spiritual districts of Nepal, where *chaupadi pratha* is an important issue. There are altogether 9 local levels (three municipalities and six rural municipalities) in which Palata is one of the remotest rural municipalities. *Chhaupadi* system is a traditional practice in which women and girls are forbidden to touch anything and have to live in cowsheds during their menstruation period. It is a widespread practice prevalent in Far-west and some parts of Mid-west region of Nepal. In Mid-West, it is prevalent in Kalikot, Jumla, Humla, Mugu, Dailekh, Jajarkot, and Surkhet districts. In these areas, family and society do not treat menstruation as natural phenomena (Amgain, 2011).

History of menstruation is said to be from religious practices where it was believed that God and Goddess will be angry with women who stay in the family house along with their family members during menstruation. According to the belief, Indra, the King of Heaven was accused of killing a Brahmin and because of the illicit acts with women that Indra committed during his quest to redeem his sins, for these acts all women were said to be punished by menstruation (Hussain, 2012). This practice stems from the belief that when woman has her periods, she is called “impure” and could “pollute” and “contaminate” the house by staying there during her menstruation periods. So, once a month, during the entire length of their menstruation, women are banished to the *chhaupadi* sheds, which they can only leave once their periods are over (Rebaud, 2011). In the strictest observance of *chhaupadi*, women are prevented from looking at the sun, interacting with males and cattle,

drinking dairy products and conducting their daily chores. 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” (Rebaud, 2011).

A menstruating woman cannot touch anyone; if anyone touches her, the person needs to be purified by taking a bath and drinking cow's urine, *gahut*, or sprinkling gold washed water, called *sun-pani*. Specifically, she is not permitted to touch pregnant women or trees, because of the idea that the “fruit” each are bearing will die or will be malformed. Menstruating women are not permitted to participate in religious ceremonies, nutritious food is forbidden, and warm clothing is not allowed. Yet, they are still expected to participate in hard labor, carrying out the daily chores that they would normally do, such as working in the fields, fetching firewood, washing clothes, and so on (Sharma, 2010). It is believed that if the woman does not adhere to these practices, there could be any number of negative impacts: 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 resulting in harm to the partner's genital, if sexual intercourse is done or the seclusion is broken. If these women were unable to maintain these traditions, their community would be shattered and would no longer survive. The women in Kalikot are following this ritual, as a result. In this area, family and society do not treat menstruation as natural phenomena. In *chhaupadi* system girls and women are isolated from family and home during several days in their menstrual cycle. Menstrual women are not allowed to touch men, children, cattle, living plants, and fruit bearing trees. If they touch all aforesaid things it is believed that the things become polluted and it makes god angry (Bennet, 1983). Woman needs social support, nutritious food, and warm home especially during the period of delivery, after child birth, during menstruation, but women of Mid-western region of Nepal have to live in either cowshed or buffalo shed or in *chhaupadi* shed and eat less dietary food. At a period of transition, they have to follow varieties of restrictions. They are denied to eat ghee, milk, curd, etc and are forbidden to touch public tap, temple, home, and food either (Amgain, 2011). There are pouring news most often about the women and girls being raped in the menstrual huts, physical violence against women, their death due to snake bites or the psychological hazards they must face during segregation period even in the time of

rational reasoning, spreading knowledge, and globalization. This evil practice has generated overwhelming problematic for the civilized society.

This research has been carried out in Palata Rural Municipality Ward no. 8 of the Kalikot district. The reason behind choosing this area as the study site is that there are more or less 5-6 researches done before in this area. Many numbers of studies must be undertaken but the problem remains unsolved without bringing about any transformation in the existing phenomena can be even serious. Therefore, this area is chosen as the study site. The objective of this study is to understand and to analyze process, perception and experience of *chhaupadi* system of women who practice it. This study is mainly focused on describing the process of *chhaupadi* system that the people of this study area are following since years; to identify and explain the negotiating pathways for the continuation of menstrual practices and taboos even if it has been recognized as one of the evils; and to find-out the impact of *chhaupadi* system in community.

Methodology

Selection and rationale of the study area

The study area for this research is Palata Rural Municipality ward no. 8 Naibada of Kalikot district. This is a remote area with rural settlement practicing traditional norms, values and cultures. I have selected this area because it is one of the rural and backward local levels in Nepal. People of this area believe in traditional ways and due to backwardness caused by illiteracy they strictly follow *chhaupadi* system. This research moves around the activities and behavior of people to meet the objective of the study.

Palata of Kalikot has an area of 318.84 square kilometers and the total population of the rural municipality is 15,303 according to 2011 national census.



Figure 1: [Red point showing study area] #source: Google

Research design

This research follows qualitative and descriptive research design. For this study both primary and secondary data have been used to explore the phenomena properly. All primary information is collected from field visit. The source of primary data depends on direct indirect observation, interview and discussion with men and women respondents.

Nature and source of data

The primary source of data for this research is a structured questionnaire among 150 respondents of Palata Rural Municipality ward no. 8 Naibada of Kalikot district in order to get more accuracy in results. Most of the respondents were of menstruation age group and some were of pre- and post- menstruation age group (menopause). Religious persons, ritual performers, and women activists have also been included as the respondents. The research has carried some formal and informal interviews with the respondents of the study area especially females who are bearing this system for centuries. It has also carried questionnaire schedule, observation and group discussion which are the main tools of collecting actual information for the study.

Visiting directly the study area was the prior motto of this study. Data information related to the study has been collected through observation. Home visits, respondent's body language response and other activity, some economic sources, literacy status, situation of family and other necessary conditions for the research were observed while interviewing.

Several group discussion sessions were conducted among local women group while visiting the study site. From the discussion the phenomenon has been better

understood, about concept of *chhaupadi*, existence and process of *chhaupadi* system, and efforts or hindrances for eradicating this system permanently.

Data analysis and presentation

Collected data have been analyzed descriptively; all the quantitative data have been analyzed using simple tactical techniques, such as the query distribution, tabulation and classification. In the case of quality data information has been transcribed, reviewed, categorized, and analyzed descriptively. All the analyzed data have been interpreted both qualitatively and quantitatively as per the necessity, in order to find out the result of this research.

Analysis of the result obtained

To find out the prior motto of this research a set of questionnaire and formal, informal interviews were taken. For the more accuracy in results, 150 respondents were selected; out of which 75 were women, 25 were men, 25 were children and 25 were aged persons. The study sample consisted of menstruating women from various age group, religious persons in the community, faith healers, aged people, and social activists. The result obtained is mentioned as follows.

Literacy rate of the selected study site

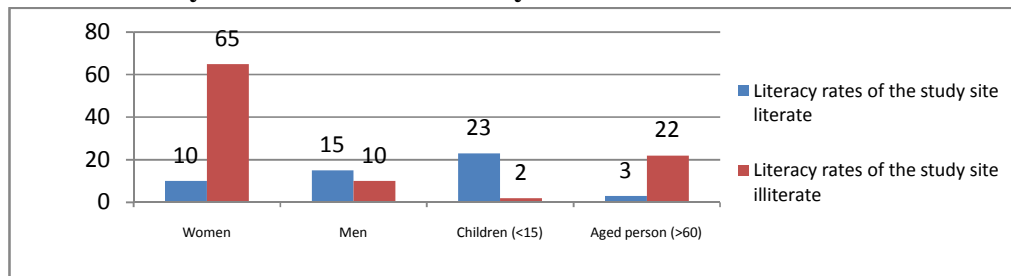


Figure 2: Literacy rate of the study site, source field survey

This data in fig. 2 shows low rate of literacy therein selected study site. Most of the women were found illiterate and the aggregate literacy rate is found very low compared to the other cities of Nepal.

Persons following *chhaupadi* system

Categorically 75 women, 25 men, 25 teenagers, and 25 aged people were selected in the sample population of 150 residing in the study area. Only one man was found to be not following the tradition of *chhaupadi* that can be represented in the figure:

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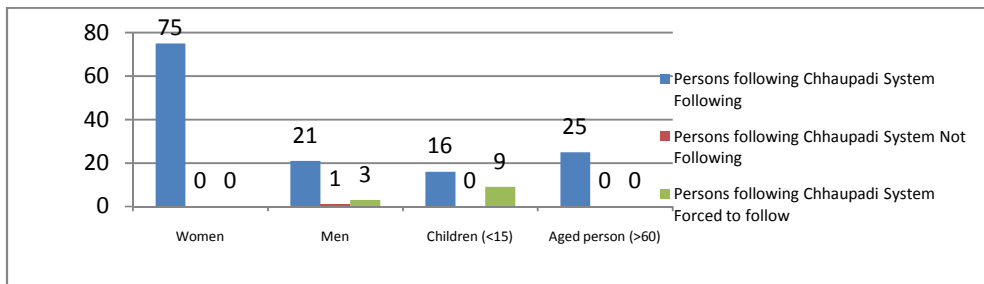


Figure 3: Columns showing the ratio of people following *chhaupadi* System, field survey

The data in figure 3 shows a ratio of the people therein Palata who follow, do not follow and forced to follow this evil practice of *chhaupadi* System. This data shows that most of the people of this area are following this *chhaupadi* System. This evil practice is rooted in this area since years.

Menstrual huts therein Palata

Menstrual huts have been surveyed in the study area among 150 sample households. The observation has been depicted in the figure:

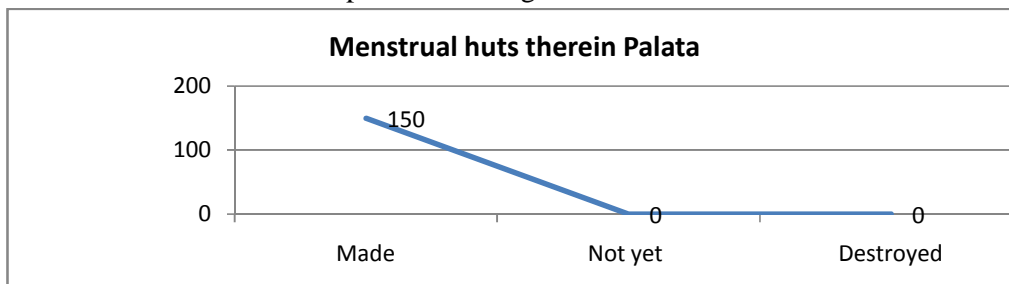


Figure 4: Menstrual huts therein Palata, source field survey

This figure shows that the menstrual huts (*chhaupadi goth*) prepared therein Palata. This shows that all the families have made *chhaupadi* sheds in order to put the menstruating women. Women should live in the sheds during her menstruating days.

Untouchability during menstruation

It was found that the people are following the tradition transferred from previous generation without any hesitation. Their response regarding the deep rooted consciousness has been depicted in the figures below:

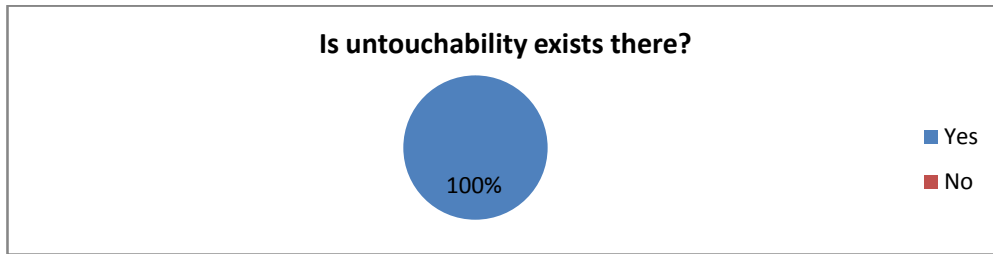


Figure 5: Untouchability in study site, source field survey

This data shows the area is completely accepting evil practice of *chhaupadi* system and during menstruation untouchability to the living plants, animals (cow) exists and women are strictly restricted to go to temples, participating good rituals in house, and were also restricted meeting guests and other people. They strictly follow this evil system of untouchability and segregation, according to our field study observation.

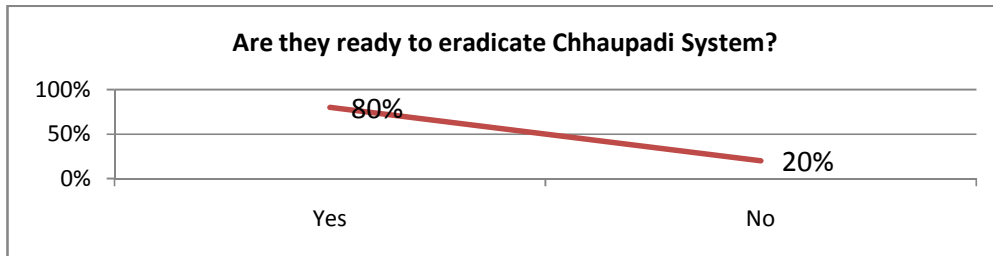


Figure 6: Percentage of people ready to eradicate this *chhaupadi*, field survey

The most of the old aged people are not ready to eradicate this evil system because this system has existed since centuries and rooted deeply. No any old aged people are ready to say no to this evil practice. Few of the teenagers were ready to eradicate this system but due to the risk of the society, they were also not in the situation of saying no to this system by heart. They showed fear of some evil to happen to them and to the society.

Reasons behind continuation of this evil practice of *chhaupadi*

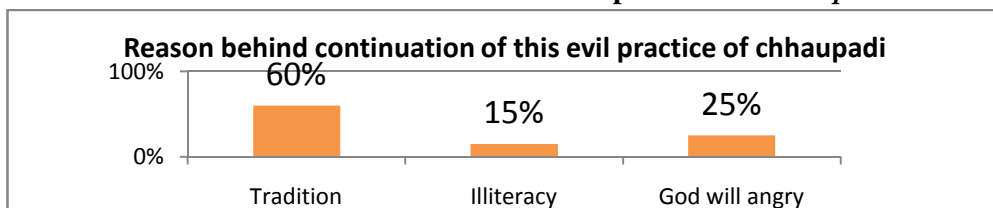


Figure 7: Reasons behind the continuation of *chhaupadi*, field survey

The reason behind the continuation of this evil practice of *chhaupadi* is its tradition. This evil practice had been in performance since very long and it has become a part of their culture deeply rooted in the consciousness of the people and social institutions. This is the main reason found from field visits. Illiteracy is also the reason behind continuation of this evil practice. Above figure suggests that 60% of the respondents reasoned deep rooted tradition to be the cause of the continuation of the practice, whereas 15% responded illiteracy and 25% religious laden superstition to be the cause behind the deep rootedness of the system even if they considered it to be the evil. Most of the people of this area are illiterate and that is why people believe in this evil tradition very blindly.

They believe that the God will get angry, destroy everything, and every uneven activity will happen thereafter. So, they fear of going against this evil system and adopt it. The ward-chairman, on his interview, said that this practice is performed since very long and rooted deeply. Trying to skip out of this practice will take years of struggle from both government side, activists' side and from the public level as well. One of the women activists of this area, on her condition of keeping her name secret, said that she is trying to get rid of *chhaupadi* but she lamented on not achieving success over it. She claimed that she is giving education to the women and other people of this area but her single effort is not working there. At last of the interview, she said hopefully it will be eradicated in our days if we all worked together actively and the level of education increases.

One of the local faith healer (*Jhakri*) insisted that if any women ignores on the things restricted during her menstruation she will get illness. He claimed that he would surely fall ill and said that it is our culture since our birth and we are not ready to leave this at any cost. Our deity will do every uneven thing thereafter if we leave this tradition, so he claimed he is not ready to disregard it. There are religious people, faith healers, aged people, and illiterate people who have deep rooted faith for the continuation of this menstrual ritual. Local celebrations, religious carnivals, faith healing practices are all intricately linked to the chain for the continuation of the menstrual practice of segregation in this remote part of Nepal.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this research are similar to the findings of the Gautam (2017), Amatya et al. (2018), and Khadka (2014) in relating the violation of the system resulting in serious health problem and that the deity will get angry, as a result of this, the evil practice has not been eradicated yet. However, this study further focused on the solution part of the evil practice by identifying the negotiating paths for the continuation of the system. The continuation of the system is associated with the deep rooted conviction in traditionalist society, fed and continued by religious people, faith healers, ritual performers, and aged people. *Chhaupadi* system is prevalent not only in remote parts of backward society in Nepal, it has also been witnessed in big cities among educated people. But the performances of the menstrual segregation in cities are not so serious, as it is performed in *chhaugoths* (separate sheds in each house for menstruating women) in the remote parts like Patala. This deeply rooted system cannot be ended abruptly, but gradual transformation in people's consciousness is possible through education and modern belief system. Law enforcement can also bring about changes but it may hurt people's self respect causing in humiliation and psychological inferiority. Therefore, this research finally concludes with the following points:

-) *Chhaupadi* is an evil practice practiced since very long in the far-western province of Nepal.
-) It is rooted deeply in traditional society and the reasons behind its continuation are traditional faiths transferred from one generation to another through ritual performances of various sorts.
-) Literacy rate of this study site is found very low. This is found second most reason behind the continuation of this *chhaupadi* system.
-) All the families of this area have made menstrual huts near their houses.
-) Children of this area are trying their best to get rid of this evil practice but cannot due to the barrier of society and the social norms.
-) The people of this area are strictly following *chhaupadi* since very long.
-) The untouchability during menstruation is widespread in this area.

During menstruation, women are strictly restricted to touch living plants, animals and strictly prohibited going for temples and also attaining any good rituals in the family.

Recommendations

After the completion of this research work, following recommendations can be pointed out for the concerning bodies.

-) The literacy rate must be enhanced in order to take action against this evil practice, *chhaupadi*.
-) The people were made to destroy the menstrual huts themselves by convincing them after education. Make policy and enforce law.
-) The educating children must learn about menstruation as regular process and not as curse as claimed in mythological narratives associated with *chhaupadi*.
-) There must be undertaken some researches on the progress or changes in consciousness of the people at regular interval of time.
-) A trend of removing/destroying menstrual huts should be carried out.

The family which initiates the removal of those menstrual huts should be rewarded and others be punished.

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