

## Revolution is starting to take place in the horizon

As Sujata, 13 year old, clambered up the narrow ladder leading to small hut across from her traditional two story house, she sheepishly looked at me and said this is where I sleep when I am menstruating. The mud-brick shelter sat on the side of a yard crowded with livestock stamping on excrement and hay; chicken foraging and clucking



Sleeping on hay right next to a chicken coup.

In Gutu, as in many villages in Nepal, women become untouchables and are isolated from their families each month while they are menstruating. Girls like Sujata practice chaupadi, a tradition where menstruating women cannot even come near the porch out of fear that families will get sick, livestock will fall ill and the Gods will be angry.

Sujata's Chau goth (hut) is nicer than the ones her friends have. Nicer in the sense that it has a door with a lock for protection and a bench to sleep on. For girls in the village without a hut, they sleep in the open garden underneath the stars.



Sujata's chau goth (hut)

For generations, women in Nepal have been facing oppression in the name of religion, culture, dignity or honor. “During my time girls were not allowed to enter the house for 7 days but now, girls are allowed to come into the house on the 5<sup>th</sup> day” said Sujata’s mom, Kamala. Kamala really believes that if girls eat radish during their period then their babies will come out looking like one.

“I once had a beautiful apple tree that used to bear lots of fruit but since my daughter and daughter in law touched the tree during their menstruation, apples hardly grow on it.” Perhaps the reason it doesn’t grow fruit because it became old said Usha, an activist working for Women Girls and Child Rights Program. “Maybe that could be the reason since the tree is about 20 years old after all said Kamala, but I highly doubt it because it has been that way since they touched it.”

Chaupadi has compelling links to cultural and religious beliefs. “Girls have to follow certain “norms” during the “unclean” period of menstruation” said Sujata. She is barred from participating in prayers and festivals, though she can eat the food that is cooked during festivals. If a girl breaks some of the rules or behaves inappropriate then the Gods will be angry and in return, they will kill the livestock and bring the family bad luck.

As mentioned before that girls are relegated into very unhygienic living conditions when practicing Chaupadi. According to Kamala, “girls should eat not papaya because it an offering made to the God”. Not only that, “girls should not touch seeds or else plants will not grow.”

“I didn’t like go to the chau goth when I was young, but my mother used to force me,” said Kamala. So why do you force your daughter and daughter in law to go to hut? “What can I do, it is a tradition and my neighbors practice it so I have to as well.”

Despite various billboard posted around the village about the harmful practices and law about chaupadi, people are still observing the practice. However, some families are starting to adopt their own ways of the practice. One or two families that I met said that girls can stay in their rooms during menstruation. Some girls are also starting to drink milk and yogurt.

Traditions like chaupadi is so ingrained into the culture and the community that it will not be obsolete overnight. While change is hard and slow, it is starting to take place in this little village called Gutu.

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