



The need of ethnographic study on Chhaupadi System prevailed in Western Part of Nepal

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Date of Submission: 24-11-2022

Date of Acceptance: 08-12-2022

Abstract

Chhaupadi system is one of the cultural traditions especially predominantly practiced in mid and far western region of Nepal, in which women and girls are forbidden to touch many things specially drinking water, God and Goddess, men, fruit plants, livestock etc. and forced to stay in cowshed or in a narrow separate shed during menstruation. Various dimensions of Chhaupadi; social, cultural, cultural, religious, health and hygiene have been mentioned. However, there is wide gap in the research resources that shows interrelationship and reciprocal relationship between Chhaupadi and ecology especially the environmental factors. Therefore, there is the need of study on the Chhaupadi system with symbolic or interpretative perspective blending the perspective of cultural ecology to explore the previous research in such cultural traditions or taboo in their own symbolic orientation associated with the environmental understanding and to analyze the overall aspect of Chhaupadi using ethnographic description.

Key Words: Chhaupadi, Menstruation, Culture, and Social tabbos.

I. Introduction

Not only in terms of geography, Nepal is also rich culturally, socially, economically, ecologically and there are diverse social practices according to one's religion across the country. In spite of the secular status constitutionally, vast majority of Nepalese people follow Hinduism and religion plays an important role in the life and conduct of the people in society. Further, in society, on the basis of gender, women are subjected to difference, unequal and discriminated and even they have become the victims of patriarchal and socio-cultural inequalities since the ancient period. Violence against women in domestic chores and in public sphere is found mainly through the patriarchal institutions and these institutions are working for the creation of hierarchy to institutionalize such discriminations and inequalities

in terms of physical, sexual or psychological in gender basis (Bennett, 1983).

In the course of social development, the society and their people formulate some sort of rules, laws, customs, traditions, norms, values, beliefs etc. to maintain the social order and it also creates the injustice and discriminations and inequalities including violence in the form of social practices that is perpetuated by the socio-cultural institutions and Chhaupadi as one of the example of such practices found in Nepal (Bam, 2020). Here, social norms and values are acting as a controlling mechanism for maintaining the social behavior of people within the social group (Frese, 2015). However, such cultural norms and values are enforcing wrong and bad practices in some cases which are harming the people and such values are biased based on gender, caste and ethnicity, race and religion (Bicchieri & Mercier, 2014).

In Achham and other districts in the far-western region of Nepal, there are deeply rooted social issues, such as cultural misbeliefs, traditional health practices, caste-based and gender-based discrimination and exploitation. Thus, for the reasons to understand and insure equity in health and well-being among Nepalese women, it is important to explore unhealthy cultural practices prevailing in the rural and poorer areas of Nepal (Thapa et al. 2019). People are usually confused about whether they can favor or disfavor such contradict and conflicted socio-cultural norms, values and attitudes of people which is still behaved in accordance with this social norms.

Action Aid has defined Chhaupadi as an ancient tradition practiced in some rural parts of Nepal that involves banishing people, often young girls, to mud huts or sheds for the duration of their menstruation period or even longer. Moreover, the genesis of the word Chhaupadi is deeply rooted with a local word used in Raute dialects of Achham district of the far western Nepal and the word 'Chhau' carries the meaning of menstruation and 'padi' means the woman or girls (Amgain, 2012).



In Nepal, menstrual women are treated as an impure socio-culturally during the period and they are excluded to participate in their household decision making, and there is restrictions to participate in households, in public spheres and in other places like in temples, field to work, water sources like in pond, tap etc.

Similarly, there are also the systematic human rights violations including equality and health (Dahlqvist, 2015). People want to eradicate such conservation cultural norms, values about Chhaupadi in one hand because such social evil practices are obstacle for the development of women and overall society and in another hand, people are afraid of if disobeying such socio-cultural norms and values, society will be on the verge of danger from their supernatural power, that's why, they are still continued to practice and if anyone disobey such practices and social norms associated with Chhaupadi they may punished by the family and patriarchy to their family members (Amatya et al., 2018).

In Nepal, only, 6% of the Nepalese girls regarded menstruation as a physiological process and more than 82% of the girls perceived as a sinful or impure or curse in practices and socio-culturally demarked as menstrual blood are polluted that symbolized the sign of danger. In one hand, people believe and obey such discriminatory customs in one way and in another way they want to completely eradicate such social evils in their society (Kadariya & Aro, 2015).

II. Discussion

Many researches have been conducted on the topic of Chhaupadi especially concerning to Chhaupadi as an evil practice in relation to the women's rights and their reproductive health. Though, menstrual cycle is biological in many socio-cultural settings, it is continued in these society socio-culturally with their own cultural traditions, customs and norms (UNFPA, 2018). In the developed nations, women assume menstrual periods as the part of their private lives and will not affect their ability to work, go to school or otherwise they can contribute to society work (Pandey and Malhotra, 2019). As opposed to the statement, women are considered unclean during the menstrual period in Nepal (Pandey, 2014). Though menstruation is a normal physiological process, it is still surrounded with social taboos, supernatural beliefs, misconceptions, and malpractices, which is very challenging for girls in developing countries [Belayneh et al., 2019, Taguegne et al. 2014]. Due to these social stigmatic, cultural, and religious

restrictions, menstrual practices are regarded as big limitation for menstrual hygiene management [Kaur et al. 2018]. Also, taboos and misconceptions on the subject of menstruating girls and menstrual hygiene develop in gender inequality and degradation of women empowerment [Acharya et al. 2006].

The menstrual huts were built in the ancient period and patriarchal societies in Nepal (Yadav et al. 2017, Pandey, 2014, Sapkota et al. 2013). Menstrual huts are associated with ideas of pollution, misogyny, and inter-sexual tension known variously as 'Chhue' in Dadelhdhura district, 'Chhaupadi' in Achham and Bajura District and 'Chueekula' in Humla District. Although there are differences in menstruation and delivery by nation and within a nation on customs, culture, beliefs, ethnic group, social class or family. Menstruation related myths, misconceptions, superstitions and taboos concerning menstrual blood and menstrual hygiene is the subject of thinking from researcher and policy makers in Nepal (Juyal et al., 2013)

It is found that some cultural believes were more prominent in Bolivia that, if menstrual women touch the cold water that became impure and the girls or women who became infertile if she is touched by the menstrual women while bathing (UNICEF, 2012). From this reference, it is clear that the menstrual women is not perceived as impure by men but also from women too and patriarchy. Similarly, in one of the developed country of Asia-Japan, women are less competent than male Japanese Sushi Chefs while making Sushi because of their menstrual cycle adversely affects their taste of Sushi (Bobel, 2019). So, menstruation is associated with the matter of physiology or biological discharge of blood which socio-culturally symbolizes the greater meaning accordance with the nature of socio-cultural patterns of that particular society.

According to a survey in 2019 by researchers in mid-western region of Nepal from the University of Bath and the Centre for Research on Environment, Health, and Population Activities (CREHPA) in Nepal, the prevalence of chhaupadi is unknown. But 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 (Adhikari, 2020). Thus, the practice of Chhaupadi requires urgent public health attention. Temporarily living in an unhygienic livestock shed or traditional Chhau shed increases the likelihood of diarrhea and dehydration, hypothermia, reproductive



tract and urinary tract infections (Ranabhat et al., 2015). Moreover, the mental health of women and girls is impacted by feelings of abandonment, insecurity, guilt, and humiliation for being “impure” and “untouchable”. Worse still, deaths have been reported from poisonous snake and scorpion bites as well as wild animal attacks on women and girls residing in menstrual exile shed. Despite the threat this practice poses to the health and well-being of women and girls, limited research has been conducted to assess the practice of Chhaupadi in Nepal. Specifically, very little is known about the experience of adolescent girls, defined by the World Health Organization as individuals aged 10–19 years, practicing Chhaupadi. Their viewpoints are important to evaluate; they are recently introduced to nature’s phenomenon of menstruation and newly experiencing the practice of Chhaupadi. These young girls represent the future of Nepal and may hold the key to eliminating Chhaupadi. Thus, it is essential to evaluate their perceptions and lived experience of Chhaupadi.

Despite hundreds of studies done, almost studies revealed that Chhaupadi system is an evil and inhuman socio-cultural practice and should be ended up as well as the deepest rooted traditional beliefs that have been practiced in mid and Far-western Nepal. (Amatya et al.2018). However, these studies do not take into account the role of ecology in the practice of Chhaupadi and what relationship exist between Chhaupadi and Ecology of the study area. People have to understand that a culture is a way of living a life of a group of people including the behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbols that are generally accepted and followed without thinking about them and are passed along by communication, imitation from one generation to the another. Similarly, ecology is the study of the relationships between living and non-living component of the environment. This means cultural ecology is the study of adaptation of a culture in a specific environment comprising of living including human and non-living components. Therefore, it is the time and surely the need to conduct researches to study the interrelationship between the ecology of the place and the Chhaupadi Practice using Steward, J. (1955)“Concept and method of Cultural Ecology, in theory of Culture Change”. She defined cultural ecology and discusses how culture influences management of the environment and vice versa. According to Steward (1955) Cultural ecology is defined as the study of how culture effects adaptations to the environment. Any human adaption involves technologies, practices and knowledge that allow people to live in an environment. Similarly, when

theoretical visualize, the theory of Emile Durkheim is also relevant to define the Chhaupadi comprehensively ecological or environmental determination to cultural practiced.

However, the discriminating behavior towards women, mostly during menstruation has changed slightly as nowadays in Nepal, mainly in Kathmandu, it is difficult to know actual situation of putting menstrual women isolate while they are in menstruation. Lawmakers, government stakeholders, administration non-government organizations, various organizations who are working in women are increasing advocacy, developing more plans, programs to eradicate such discriminatory rules and practices that are still continued in society for women while in menstrual cycle as impure, still there significant changes could not be found in the attitudes, norms and values of individual and society towards the menstrual women. The Interim Constitution of Nepal 2063 (2007) has progressive provisions regarding women’s right. Article 20 has guaranteed the right to women and article 29 (2) reads as “No one shall be exploited in the name of any custom, tradition and usage or in any manner whatsoever”. Section 12 of Civil Rights Act 1955 has stated no one shall be deprived of his/her life or personal liberty. Similarly there are different human rights instrument assuring women’s right, dignity and equality with men. One of the glaring examples of initiatives is the Directive to Eliminate Chhaupadi Pratha 2008 (Chhaupadi Unmulan garna baneko Nirdesika, 2064). Still, women and girls are forcefully made to follow this ill practice in the name of culture and tradition (Bhandari et al., 2013).

A survey report published in July, 2017 in the national newspaper The Kathmandu Post stated that around 60 percent of people in Karnali region do not know Chhaupadi is illegal and that they continue to practice the age-old tradition, in which girls and women are banished to cow sheds and Chhau huts outside their homes during menstruation and after childbirth. Despite the situation, the government and NGOs claim that they have been actively working to combat Chhaupadi by destroying Chhau huts, organizing awareness programmes and declaring Chhaupadi-free VDCs. The right ensured by the constitution, however, still eludes a large number of women in Karnali. The main reason behind Chhaupadi, as the report states, is the superstitious belief that menstruating women are impure and they should be consigned to isolation, lest their presence inside homes should bring curse to their families by angering gods. Besides denying women of their basic human rights,



Chhaupadi has also been undermining their health and safety.

Moreover, many organizations have also launched various programs to abolish such discriminatory practices, which they are facing daily. So, the main gap here is to find out if there are ecological and environmental causes to practice the Chhaupadi system, where are the gaps between them. Likewise, actual knowledge of general people especially above puberty age and their attitude on the practices of Chhaupadi is to be explored so that it will be helpful to find out the gap between customs and provisioned law and in real practices along with the factors that are determining and helping to determine are also needed to be explored.

In one hand there are various laws provisioning the protection of rights of women and in another hand there are still women subjected to the discrimination to enter inside the house while they are in menstrual cycle and they are settled in Chau Goth without basic facilities to stay in the name of cultural practices, taboo, traditions etc. problems too.

III. Conclusion

Although Nepal Government has campaigned for destroying the Chhau Goth (the shed), the problem was not solved and could not bring any transformation in the existing phenomena which can be more serious. Most of the Nepalese women, especially in the rural areas of far-western Nepal, are forced to follow the harmful menstrual practices because of the socio-cultural context surrounding their lives (Thapa et al. 2019). Thus, the study about the existing situation of Chhaupadi is to be studied and to acquire the perceptions of people practicing Chhaupadi or living in such environment. Similarly, the study of cultural as well as traditional practices like Chhaupadi under ethnographic lens is a most to visualize the overall psychological and physiological consequences associated with it. An academic work in Chhaupadi along with socio-cultural, religious, economic, political factors will help to obtain the comprehensive knowledge about why Chhaupadi is still practiced in western Nepal.

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