

The New York Times

ASIA PACIFIC

In Rural Nepal, Menstruation Taboo Claims

Another Victim

By BHADRA SHARMA and JEFFREY GETTLEMAN JAN. 10, 2018



Women and their children in a chhaupadi hut in western Nepal in September. Nepal's government has been trying to discourage the chhaupadi tradition, in which menstruating women are banished from the home. Narendra Shrestha/European Pressphoto Agency

KATHMANDU, Nepal — The last time anyone saw Gauri Kumari Bayak alive, she was gathering grass and firewood. Considered impure because she was menstruating, she was about to sleep outside in a cold hut.

She never woke up.

According to the police, Ms. Bayak is the latest victim of a very old tradition in rural Nepal, in which religious Hindus believe that menstruating women are unclean and should be banished from the family home. She was found dead on Monday, apparently having asphyxiated after building a small fire inside the hut to keep warm.

In Nepal, [one of Asia's poorest countries](#), dozens of women and girls have died in recent years from following this tradition, despite activists' campaigns and government efforts to end the practice.

Menstruating women often trudge outside at night to bed down with cows or goats in tiny, rough, grass-roofed huts and sheds. Many have been raped by intruders or died from exposure to the elements.

Last summer, the [Nepalese government made it illegal](#) for anyone to force a menstruating woman or girl to sequester herself, with violators subject to jail time or fines. But the law came with a grace period to give people time to absorb the new rules, and no punishments are to be handed out until August.

All of this, of course, was too late for Ms. Bayak, 22, who has been described as a talented, highly motivated young woman. Her family said she had been teaching illiterate women to read while finishing her own high school degree, and sewing dresses at night.

[Radha Paudel](#), a Nepali women's rights activist, was struck by the fact that Ms. Bayak's family was relatively educated and well off.

“This is what makes me upset,” Ms. Paudel said. “Even people who consider themselves very sophisticated, very educated, very cultured, they are still doing this, because of religion.”

The practice is called [chhaupadi](#), which in the Nepali language means something like “tree omen.” The vast majority of Nepal’s population is Hindu, and in ancient Hindu culture, menstruating women were considered toxic — if they entered a temple, they polluted it; if they handled the family’s food, everyone would become sick; if they touched a tree, that tree would never bear fruit.

According to her family, Ms. Bayak dreamed of moving to Nepal’s capital, Kathmandu, and living happily as a tailor. She lived in a remote village in western Nepal with her husband’s family, who ran a shop. Her husband, a police officer in Kathmandu, said he had never forced his wife to follow the chhaupadi tradition, but that she insisted because women in her part of Nepal had done so for as long as anyone could remember.

At this time of year, Nepal is quite cold, especially at night. In Ms. Bayak’s area, the temperature dropped close to freezing on Monday. Police officials said the shed where she was sleeping had no windows, and that they found fresh coals near her body, evidence that she had built a small fire.

Last summer, another young woman died while following the chhaupadi ritual. That woman had been banished to a small hut where she was [bitten by a poisonous snake](#).

“What this is, is segregation,” said Ms. Paudel, the activist. “And we as a society don’t talk enough about it. We don’t talk about dignity, we don’t talk about women’s rights.”

Bhadra Sharma reported from Kathmandu, and Jeffrey Gettleman from New Delhi.

A version of this article appears in print on January 11, 2018, on Page A4 of the New York edition with the headline: In Nepal, a Taboo Claims Another Victim. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)