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TRUE LOVE COLLIDES WITH CASTE DISCRIMINATION IN NEPAL'S VILLAGES



July 9, 2008, Sihara District, Nepal: Satyanarayan Mandal and Hemlata Chaudhary had been in love for six years. The only problem was that Satyanarayan was a Dalit, while Hemlata came from an upper caste.

When Hemlata's parents arranged for her to marry another man, the two lovers eloped. Retaliation quickly followed. Villagers beat up the Mandal family, burned their home, and forced them to leave the village.

The case, which has sent shock waves through the Dalit community in southeast Nepal, has been investigated by the Jagaran Media Center (JMC), a Dalit advocacy group that monitors discrimination and publishes an online e-bulletin. JMC is a partner of The Advocacy Project (AP).

The pressure on inter-caste marriages has received little publicity in Nepal, but this may be changing. According to JMC, twelve Dalit families were displaced from their homes in the Surkhet district after the June 30 wedding of Khadka Bahadur Sunar, a Dalit man, and Jaisara Baduwal, who is non-Dalit. Villagers severely beat Ms Baduwal, kidnapped Mr Sunar's sister, and assaulted journalists who tried to investigate.

JMC officials say that such cases show that Dalit face deep hatred in the villages, even though the government has formally outlawed caste and the new Constituent Assembly has declared Nepal a republic. The JMC also points out that that the local police have yet

to intervene in the Mandal case, and that the Nepali government and international human rights groups have been silent.

“The Dalit of Nepal have to undergo the same sort of atrocities as before,” said Dilip Kumar Nepali, JMC’s General Secretary. “Even now, caste-based discrimination and untouchability prevails.”

Upon receiving news of the Mandal case, JMC sent a monitoring team to Sihara. The team found that many of the family’s former Dalit neighbors were reluctant to speak because of fear, but eventually the facts emerged.

Following the couple’s elopement, Ms Chaudhary’s family convened a local jury, which fined Mr Mandal’s father 81,000 rupees (\$1,190). The elder Mr Mandal found 26,000 rupees (\$380) by selling land, and pleaded for the rest of the fine to be forgiven. Instead, the jury decided to expel the whole family. The Mandals were driven out on July 4 and their home was set on fire. Several family members, along with other Dalits who defended the couple, were also beaten by members of the Chaudhary family.

Thanks to the persistence of JMC journalists, the story eventually reached the Nepali press. JMC is now demanding a halt in such attacks and legal action against those responsible.

The case underscores the importance of regular reporting from the villages while a new constitution is being drafted by the Constituent Assembly in Kathmandu. Ten Dalit journalists are contributing to the JMC e-bulletin from around the country, using a grant from the Dutch organization Cordaid. AP has recruited two Peace Fellows, Jes Therkelsen and Heather Gilberts, to volunteer with JMC this summer.

Meanwhile, from Washington, AP intern Mary Adair McGrath is promoting the JMC e-bulletin with Dalit advocates in the diaspora, and with agencies like the UN Development Program (UNDP) that fund village projects in Nepal.

- Learn more about the [JMC journalists](#).
- Read the blogs of AP Peace Fellows [Heather Gilberts](#) and [Jes Therkelsen](#).

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