

## DALIT ADVOCATES FIGHT PREJUDICE AND SUPERSTITION IN VILLAGES OF NEPAL

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Kathmandu, Nepal and Washington, DC: For as long as villagers could remember, the small whitewashed temple in the village of Ghudigawm Gudi, Eastern Nepal, had been barred to Dalit (formerly known as “Untouchables”) because of their caste. Last month, a small group of Dalit challenged the taboo. They entered the temple, lit incense and said a short prayer to the local God before leaving.

The reaction from non-Dalit was furious. They left a dead cow by a well that is used by Dalit, refused to sell food to Dalit, and threatened to destroy the temple rather than allow it to be used by Dalit. The two sides even met and exchanged blows. Several people were hurt and the police were called.

Such clashes are increasingly common in the villages of Nepal as the country’s Dalit struggle to reverse centuries of caste discrimination and escape poverty. 80 percent of the country’s 3.5 million Dalit live below the poverty line.

The Dalit struggle has been overshadowed by Nepal’s political crisis, which was triggered when King Gyanendra seized the government on February 1, and by the long-running Maoist rebellion. It is profiled in a new series of blogs by Iain Guest, Director of The Advocacy Project (AP), who has been traveling in Nepal with a mission from the Jagaran Media Center (JMC), a prominent advocate for Dalit rights and an AP partner. These blogs will be posted daily on the AP website over the next three weeks.

Dalit are the fourth, and lowest caste, recognized by the Hindu religion. Nepal is a Hindu state, and while a constitutional provision outlaws the practice, Dalit enjoy little protection under the law. In addition, the state officially recognizes 22 Dalit “sub-castes,” based on professions, which creates a hierarchy among Dalit.

The recent JMC mission found many examples of structural discrimination based on caste. In the town of Nepalgunj, it met with Dalit known as “balighary,” who work for upper castes but are paid in rice instead of cash. One worker, Sagun Pariyar received \$40 in rice for a year’s work that would normally pay \$570.

In Mudha, Western Nepal, the mission met with women who have been forced into prostitution because they are from the Badi sub-caste. In Lahan, the mission interviewed families that do not have citizenship - again because they are Dalit. In many schools, Dalit children sit at the back of the class where they are less likely to attract the attention of teachers. All of these practices help to keep Dalit in the poverty trap.

Unlike India, where Dalit played a key role in the independence movement and are politically powerful, Nepal's Dalit have no political representatives. Their place has been filled by scores of advocacy groups, which are working in the communities to inform Dalit about their rights and help them to mobilize.

These organizations collect information about abuses and relay it to partners like the JMC, who use it to put pressure on the Nepalese authorities. Many Dalit advocates are also seeking to make more use of information technology in their campaigns. The Advocacy Project is developing a project with the JMC to help its partners produce regular information and upgrade their IT skills.

As part of its own advocacy, the JMC is lobbying to get more Dalit journalists onto regional newspapers, which are highly influential in Nepal. The JMC has won the tentative agreement of the powerful Federation of Nepali Journalists to admit more Dalit journalists. Less than 50 of the Federation's 5,000 members are Dalit. Dalit are estimated to account for over 13 percent of the total population in Nepal.

Although Dalit activists see their campaign as closely allied to the struggle for democracy, they also insist on having separate goals. "There will be no peace in Nepal as long as there is caste discrimination" said Ganesh Bishwokarma, from the Rastrya Dalit Network, in the town of Kailali.

At the same time, Dalit advocates can never escape the fact that they are working in a country at war, and in crisis. This is particularly true of towns like Kailali, in the West, where the Maoist presence is strong. The Maoists' ideology is fiercely opposed to caste, and this has attracted Dalit to their ranks. But the JMC has also been called upon to investigate examples of violence and abuse against Dalit by Maoists.

On one occasion - described in the AP blogs - JMC investigated a case of rape by Maoists. On another, Suvash Darnal, head of the JMC, trekked into the jungle to meet with a Maoist leader after 50 Dalit families were displaced by Maoists cadres from their homes. The Maoists agreed to punish those responsible and give each displaced family 12,000 rupees (\$170). The JMC achievement was widely reported in the local and international press.

- Visit the Jagaran Media center [website](#)