

DALIT WOMEN ACCUSED OF WITCHCRAFT, FORCED TO EAT EXCREMENT

Advocacynet

News Bulletin 56, January 19, 2006

Kathmandu, Nepal and Washington, DC: A 52-year-old Dalit woman and her daughter have been stripped naked, beaten, and forced to eat human feces after being accused of witchcraft in a Nepalese village, according to the [Jagaran Media Center \(JMC\)](#), a partner of [The Advocacy Project \(AP\)](#).

The latest JMC report, which is posted on the AP website, states that Dayawati Urab was accused by a traditional healer of causing “mental distress” to a neighbor in the village of Sunsari and attacked the following night. Her daughter, Sunita Kumari Urab, was also branded as a witch, stripped and forced to eat excrement alongside her mother.

Although untouchability was abolished in Nepal by law in 1963, the practice still continues. The violence inflicted on Dayawati and her daughter also reflects the fact that within the Dalit caste, women are particularly vulnerable from prejudice, a patriarchal social system, and even Dalit males.

The school drop-out rate is highest among Dalit girls, and only six percent of Dalit women are literate. Representation of Dalit women in administration and political bodies is non-existent. According to a recent Human Rights Watch report, “within the women’s movement, Dalit issues have not been taken seriously.”

Dayawati’s ordeal shows that once a woman is branded a witch in a village, she will find it hard to restore her reputation. According to the JMC, this is the third time that Dayawati has been forced to eat excrement. In 2005, she was also fined 3,000 rupees after being accused of witchcraft, and her husband, Tikaram, fired from his job.

As well as trumped up, the charges usually take the form of personal vendettas. JMC reports that Dayawati’s main accusers are Ganga Urab, Indra Lal Urab, and Melawati Urab - the same three villagers who have persecuted her for the last three years.

Dayawati has now been banned from participating in religious functions and is so severely stigmatized that she cannot make a living. "They [the locals] hold me responsible for all the accidents," she said.

Established in 2000 by a small group of Dalit journalists to advocate for Dalits in Nepal, the JMC has stepped up its efforts to monitor abuses in villages, where discrimination against Dalit is most prevalent and vicious.

The information is collected by JMC reporters, sometimes at great personal risk. One JMC reporter was physically assaulted after protesting against a scam in the town of Biratnagar, in

which a local official was milking a Dalit education fund. The resurgence of the Maoist rebellion will also make it harder to report freely from the countryside.

As part of its partnership agreement with the JMC, The Advocacy Project posts JMC bulletins on the AP web site and home page, and issues regular stories on the Dalit through AP's online news service. The JMC and AP are now seeking funds to help the JMC's field reporters and field offices make better use of information technology.

AP's Director Iain Guest visited Nepal in October and reported on several grassroots Dalit advocacy campaigns, including efforts to free Badi women, who have been forced into prostitution because of their caste.