

A Society Follows Women-made Regulation

By Jayaprakash Tripathi

It may sound unbelievable that a regulation made by women is abided by the society. But if the work is noble, gender is not an issue. The sisters' and mothers' groups of Gulmi district have proven that the society will definitely implement women-made conventions if they are beneficial. If anyone dies in Hardineta village, every household has to compulsorily contribute firewood and Rs 200 in cash.

When financial difficulties prevented him from observing a traditional practice, Lahurekanchha of Choyaga village, Hardineta VDC-7, Gulmi district, Nepal, was really hurt. He could not perform the last rites for his beloved daughter as per the Vedic rituals, due to lack of money.

But even before that, his daughter had a long-suffering story at the hands of her husband and in-laws. All because Lahurekanchha could not afford a grand wedding and the dowry demanded by the groom's side. Unable to bear the suffering of the apple of his eye, Lahurekanchha called her back to his house. Although the informal marriage break-up was always a subject of pain for Lahurekanchha, he somehow consoled himself thinking that in his house, his daughter, at least, was not suffering the pain she had gone through in her husband's house.

But Lahurekanchha's heart was torn asunder when his young daughter suddenly fell ill and died. He did not have money to buy firewood and meet other expenses to perform her last rites. He was

forced to dig a pitch and bury her by a local *ghat* (funeral platform by a riverbank for Hindus). Lahurekanchha's plight in Choyaga village is not the only example. There are many other cases where locals have not been able to perform age-old rites, rituals and customs due to sheer lack of even the most minimum financial resources.

However, the womenfolk of Choyaga have rolled up their sleeves to end this kind of suffering, and they have ushered in reforms. Earlier, men used to play a decisive role in any issue concerning the entire society. Even among them, a few so-called "bigwigs" of the village enjoyed the real power of decision-making. Traditionally, men were at the helm of social affairs but they have not succeeded in solving their society's problems. Conflict had forced many young men to flee the village whereas older men whiled away their time playing cards, gambling, and engaging in useless chat. Thus, even minor social problems assumed great and complex proportions in any such village. Choyaga was no exception.

Currently, the Choyaga Mothers' Group and the Choyaga Sisters' Group are the two women groups doing social work in the village. Rita Tandon, President of the mothers' group, claims that the group formed two years ago is tackling the village's problems head-on.

The groups have created an opportune environment for women to take on a more active role in the village. In the course of time, the mothers' group, together with the sisters' group, started making important decisions and their combined initiatives have spread across the society, says Indira Tandon, president of Choyaga Sisters' Group.

Shova Midun, the sisters' group secretary, claims that currently 70 families abide by the custom of the two organisations, that is, paying Rs 200 in cash along with some firewood, which is used for cremation. Since the custom entitles each bereaved family to Rs 14,000 in cash and adequate quantity of firewood, people are able to perform last rites for their relatives without any economic and mental strain. According to Basanta Karki,

a member of the mothers' group, this novel custom also mandates that no family, however rich, can reject the assistance while poor families, too, must contribute specified assistance as far as possible. This custom thereby ends discrimination between rich and poor people in the village, and gives rise to the feeling of equality, fosters rural unity, and leads to social advancement and development, opines social activist Major Sher Bahadur Tandon.

All the locals are happy and satisfied with the convention introduced by the local women from Shrawan (June/July) this year. "Previously, only the well-to-do performed last rites at the banks of Kaligandaki at Ridhi, which is considered a pilgrimage site. But now, the poor can also cremate bodies carrying them on a vehicle. Perhaps

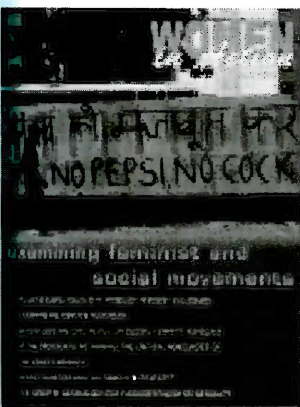
no one will have to face Lahurekanchha's fate," says a visibly satisfied Indira. On her part, Rita from the mothers' group is enthusiastic about conducting many reform-oriented programs in the village. In fact, determined women like Rita and Indira have been encouraged by the realization that they will get praises from all quarters if they are able to identify the real problem and find an appropriate solution to it.

In this context, secretary of the sisters' group Sita Karki narrates the new work done by her organisation. "Villagers have stopped using *duna-tapari* (leaf plates), Karki says. "The sisters' group has started providing all essential utensils like steel plates and bowls to villagers during festivals." She adds that a campaign to abolish alcohol and

gambling in the village will be launched soon. Local women leaders enthusiastically say that they are pushing for skill-oriented vocational training specifically for poor women. The work that the women of Choyaga are doing and plan to do may appear ordinary. But seeing the wave of awakening among them to make their society happy and prosperous, one is bound to think: If all the women in the country were to become actively involved in social reforms for better life as have their sisters in Choyaga, perhaps we would not have to wait long to see women truly emancipated.

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