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News

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Dalit woman priest works silent revolution in Nepal

Kathmandu: As Nepal's parliament remains paralysed due to bickering among the major parties and the task of drafting a ground-breaking constitution by next year seems doomed to fail, a stone's throw away from the august house Sukmaya Rokaya is working a silent but real revolution.

The 43-year-old is the priest at the Chhakkubakku Bhagwati temple in the busy Baneshwor area of the capital, hemmed by shops and pavement stalls. Besides being a woman, she is also a Dalit, a community that stands at the bottom of still-conservative Nepal's rigid social ladder and is ostracised as untouchables even now.

The mother of four comes from the Sarki clan who were originally cobblers and once forced to live on the carcasses of dead cows when Nepal was a Hindu kingdom with a ban on cow slaughter.

Before her marriage at the age of 18, when she came to live in Kathmandu, Rokaya remembers how she was not allowed to enter temples in the village in Kaski district where her parents lived. She also remembers the humiliation of not being allowed to attend any social function, especially those involving feasting.

"My heart used to grieve," Rokaya told IANS. "I would wonder, why did this happen to us? My heart still grieves at the memory of the discrimination."

But in Kathmandu, she was amazed to see that her mother-in-law,

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Chauki Rokaya, was working as the cleaner at the Chhakkubakku Bhagwati temple, the 7th century shrine of a Hindu goddess said to have been built by king Narendra Deva of the same Lichhavi dynasty that produced Indian emperor Chandragupta Maurya.

As the illiterate but hardworking Rokaya slowly took up the chores of her mother-in-law, her dedication won the esteem of the president of the temple preservation committee, Shyam Prasad Aryal.

"I would come to the temple early morning every day and it would be sparkling," said the 64-year-old Brahmin, whose clan is regarded to be at the top of the hierarchy and the arch enemy of Dalits.

"I was impressed with her dedication. I thought, we have so many Brahmins who violate their calling and yet are regarded as upper castes; and yet, this woman, whose diligence outrivals many others, is being treated as an outcast."

"So many Europeans are beef eaters. And yet we court them. But we are ostracising this woman because her ancestors were forced to live on dead cows for survival," Aryal told IANS.

Aryal had the revolutionary thought of asking Rokaya to start officiating as the priest, doing the simple things that did not need learning.

"I clean the temple and worship the deity in a simple way, offering flowers," says Rokaya. "I don't chant mantras because I don't know any. At night, I also do the aarti (worship with lamps) before the deity."

When the unusual practice started, temple goers were aghast. Many even thought of boycotting it and throwing Rokaya out.

However, despite the pressure and intimidation, Aryal stood his ground and gradually, she was accepted.

"I go to her house regularly," says Aryal. "I eat the food she offers me. I don't see any stigma in it."

While neither Rokaya nor any of her three sisters went to school, all her four children three daughters and a son are educated. The youngest has just completed school and the eldest taken training in education so that she can become a teacher.

Though Nepal officially banned untouchability in 1963, the practice is still strong, especially in the remote villages.

Over 20 percent of the nearly 29 million population are Dalits and more than half of them are women.

Ironically, Chhakkubakku Bhagwati is said to be the sister of power

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goddess Bhuvaneswari, who has her temple on the grounds of the revered Pashupatinath shrine in Kathmandu.

The 5th century Pashupatinath temple, one of the holiest Hindu shrines and declared a World Heritage Site by Unesco, employs only Brahmin priests while non-Hindus are not allowed inside the temple. Even late Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi was not allowed inside the Pashupatinath temple as he was a Parsi.

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