

Nepal Christians Fight for Burial Rights

Three years after the death of a Christian who was a captain in the Nepal Army, his widow, Gamala Guide, faces fresh grief.

The grave of her husband, Narayan Guide, is threatened with destruction as authorities of Nepal's most powerful Hindu temple are reclaiming the forested land where it is located.

"What kind of strange country is this that doesn't allow its own citizens to rest in peace?" the 55-year-old recently asked leaders of the Christian community in Kathmandu. "Please do something to stop the desecration, or my husband will die a second death."

At least 200 graves, many of them unmarked due to Christians' fear of discovery and destruction, could share the same fate. The Pashupatinath Area Development Trust, the organization administering the Pashupatinath temple that dates back to the fourth century AD, has begun renovating the shrine as Nepal celebrates 2011 as its "tourism year" with the goal of attracting 1 million visitors. The temple has been declared a world heritage site by UNESCO.

"In the late 1980s, the government gave us 292 hectares of land to develop the Pashupatinath temple," said Ram Saran Chimoria, director of the trust. "We have accordingly drawn up a five-year plan that will renovate the main shrine and beautify its surroundings. The forested land adjoining the temple will be used to grow plants considered sacred by Hindus."

Chimoria said part of the forest is also meant to be used for Hindu burials.

"A Hindu sect called the Dashnami, which has 10 sub-groups

under it, buries its dead here, as Muslims and Christians do," he said. "Since Pashupatinath is a Hindu temple, the 10 sub-groups are allowed to bury their dead here. But other communities also began burying their dead here, first pretending to be the Dashnami and then clandestinely. This is against Hindu traditions, and the temple is seeking to reclaim what belongs to it. It is the responsibility of the government to allot burial grounds to non-Hindus, not the trust's."

The burial ground lies opposite Arya Ghat, a cremation ground at Pashupatinath, where bodies are burned on pyres according to Hindu tradition. Known as the Sleshmantak Forest, it is a steep and nearly inaccessible wooded tract where monkeys and foxes roam. Locals advise visitors not to wander into the forest alone, even during day time, for fear of robbers.

"I attended several burial rites there," said Chirendra Satyal, spokesman of the Catholic Assumption Church of Kathmandu Valley. "They were all low-key. Many of the graves are unmarked to avoid detection. The burial ground is used as a garbage dumping site, and at times foxes dig up the buried bodies. There are also cases of bodies being dumped on top of one another."

An increasingly angry Christian community, tired of petitioning the government for an official burial ground, is now seeking stronger measures.

"Nepal became secular in 2006, and two years later, we petitioned the prime minister, the culture minister and the top human rights agency in Nepal, saying that in a secular democracy Christians should have the same rights as others and should be given their own burial ground," said C.B. Gahatraj, general secretary of a Christian committee formed to provide recommendations to parliament, which is drafting a new constitution. "We understand the temple's position. But the state should understand ours too."

The committee had identified forested land on the outskirts of the Kathmandu Valley, in an area called Duwakot, and proposed that it be given to them.

"We would make it one of the most idyllic sites in Nepal," said Gahatraj. "It would have gardens and would be an attractive destination for tourists as well. But so far, there has been no response from the state."

Believing the time has come for stronger action, Christians plan to discuss the issue with 22 major parliamentary parties on Sunday (Jan. 30).

"At the meeting, we will present our case again," Gahatraj said. "We also want the trust to suspend the demolition drive till we are given our own land. If there's no result, we will internationalize our case by taking our problem to international rights organizations and the United Nations."

As the first such public protest, on Feb. 15 at Maitighar Mandala, one of the most prominent areas of the capital, the Christian community will begin a "relay hunger strike." Christians are also beginning the first-ever Christian census this year to ascertain their true position in society.

"We estimate there are about 2 million Christians now [out of a population of nearly 29 million]," Gahatraj said.

Catholics, however, form a tiny fraction of the Christian community. Satyal assessed there were about 7,500 Catholics. In 2009, three women were killed at the Assumption Church when a militant underground organization planted a bomb there. All three had to be cremated.

"Land is a premium commodity in Kathmandu Valley," said Anthony Sharma, Nepal's first Catholic bishop. "When the living don't have land, it is futile to seek land for the dead. We have accepted cremation for Catholics in Nepal in keeping with acceptance worldwide."

But even the cremation is dogged by discrimination.

"The Arya Ghat cremation ground at Pashupatinath distinguishes between upper castes and lower castes," the bishop said. "If Christians are taken there, they would be treated as lower castes. So we have organized our own cremation site in Teku [in a different part of the town]."

Madhav Kumar Nepal, who resigned as prime minister on June 30 but leads a caretaker government, was regarded as having a soft spot for Christians. After the attack on the Assumption church, he was among the first state officials to visit the injured in the hospital and kept his promise to bring the culprits to justice, with police managing to arrest the blast mastermind.

Nepal resigned last year under pressure by the largest opposition party, and since then the turbulent republic has remained under a powerless caretaker government, unable to make any major decision.

With the squabbling political parties unable to form a new government and a political deadlock spilling into its seventh month, there are now new fears about the prospective constitution, which is expected to consolidate the secular nature of the nation. The constitution was to have been completed last year, but as the bickering parties failed to accomplish the task, the deadline was extended to May 28.

The delay has enabled a spurt in activities of Hindus calling for the restoration of Hinduism as the state religion. If Nepal's May deadline fails as well, Christians fear it could be impossible to obtain their own official burial site.