



# Story from the Field

## Tipping Point: Digging Up the Roots of Child Marriage to Replant the Future

### A Purohit's Campaign against Child Marriage

Ramananda Dube serves as a Purohit<sup>1</sup> for about 90 households in Harnampur, within the Ratanpur Village Development Committee [VDC] of Kapilbastu district in the Terai region of Nepal. When Dube first hears of a potential early marriage, he does not wait for an invitation to speak with the girl's parents. Ramananda visits his Yajaman's [parishioner] courtyard immediately to discuss the serious consequences of early marriage on a daughter's health and well-being. To date, Dube's home visit approach has been effective.

*"Recently, I visited Mr. Laxman Yadav's home in Harnaumpur 7, Kapilbastu after I got a call from him. He wanted me to initiate his daughters' marriage,"* said Dube. Upon visiting Mr. Yadav, Dube spoke to the father about the negative consequences of his daughter's early marriage. Foremost, Dube reminded Mr. Yadav that Nepali law prohibits early marriage and reminded him that the minimum age of marriage in Nepal is 20 – or 18, with parental consent. After this meeting with Dube, Yadav understood that, if caught, even a Purohit could be imprisoned for up to three years for his role in initiating the marriage of anyone under 18 years of age.



Though Yadav's daughter's engagement ceremony had already been held a few months prior, the time for the Tilak<sup>2</sup> ceremony was quickly approaching. Dube's visit was not warmly received by the family initially, but because of his critical role in the ceremony, the family eventually agreed to the Purohit's request to delay the marriage. Dube has learned that educating families about the law appears to be more convincing than sharing with the family the emotional, physical, and psychological ill effects of child marriage.

Many families in Kapilbastu hold onto the belief that marrying off their daughters at an early age earns religious blessings for the parents. Additionally, they often feel that early marriage can help to address the family's financial, social and cultural burden by reducing the dowry cost and freeing the family from social stigma. The Population and Housing Census, Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) shows that in Kapilvastu, 2.87% girls get married before 10 years of age, 23.05% get married between 10-14, and 59.94% get married between 15 – 19 years.

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<sup>1</sup> Story from the Field: A Purohit's Campaign against Child Marriage

*“Unlike other priests, my message to my patrons is that marrying off their daughters before menstruation doesn’t bear any blessings; rather, it is the gravest sin since it is one of the reasons for increased maternal mortality,”* he said.

*“It was the inter-religious conference organized by Aba Mero Palo [Tipping Point] project, a project of CARE Nepal which transformed me to be an activist against child marriage,”* Dube adds, *“The conference provided me with not only an idea on how child marriage has been contributing to an increase in the maternal mortality rate, but it also offered me an opportunity to think about religious myths in a different way”*. The conference transformed many priests and Maulanas<sup>3</sup> of Kapilvastu into social activists against child marriage.

Raising a voice against child marriage can be particularly dangerous in some communities; however, Dube is determined to fight against it. He continues to make home visits when he hears of upcoming child marriage ceremonies and talks publicly about the negative consequences and legal ramifications of child marriage. *“I strongly believe that people in my village and neighboring community hear me,”* Dube said.

If Dube had decided to support the child marriages of his Yajamans, like Laxman Yadav, he likely would have received money and gifts for his Purohit services; however, Dube chose to abandon those goods for the sake of the young girls in his community. *“I can’t commit sin by supporting child marriage,”* Dube said.

This story was documented by Umesh Pokharel, former Tipping Point Advocacy and Communications Officer, CARE Nepal.

<sup>1</sup> A Purohit is a Hindu priest that serves a specific community or family.

<sup>2</sup> The main objective behind the tilak ceremony is to develop the bond between the two families that are joining through marriage. Only male family members attend this ceremony, which is held at either the groom’s residence or at a temple. The ceremony begins with a pooja, or prayer, during which both families pray for the happiness of the new couple. After the pooja, it is customary for the father of the bride to offer gifts to the groom’s family. In exchange, the groom’s father sends gifts of sweets, clothing and jewelry.

<sup>3</sup> Mawlānā is a title of Muslim religious leaders, in particular graduates of religious institutions.