

## Nepal gets first gay beauty salon

As a sign of changing times, a gay beauty salon opened for the first time in Nepal and has been hailed by a Western envoy as a symbol of democratization that seeks to empower the poor and marginalised.

The Cutey Beauty Salon run by gays and trans-genders opened in Kathmandu's up-market Lazimpat area Wednesday, close to a thriving department store and a gallery.

Inaugurated by Kikkan Haugen, deputy head of mission at the Norwegian embassy, the novel project is funded by the Oslo-based Norwegian National Association of Lesbian and Gay Liberation and Sigrid Rausing Trust in London.

The salon, which offers regular beauty parlour services like haircuts, facials, manicures and pedicures, is also a training academy for members of the gay community who want to train as beauticians.

The first batch of 10 young metis - gay men who dress as women - is running the salon under the aegis of the Blue Diamond Society (BDS), Nepal's sole gay rights group.

'Up to now, nothing has been done to support trans-genders and the sexual minorities, who are the most marginalised, poor and socially excluded in Nepal,' Sunil Pant, head of BDS, told IANS.

'The salon is an opportunity for them to lead self-supporting and dignified lives so that they can make a living and contribute to the larger society. This is a first of its kind in Nepal,' Pant added.

A 21-year-old, who calls himself Sophie and works as BDS' human rights officer, is in charge of the salon.

'Metis like to use beauty aids and are naturally drawn to the beauty business,' Sophie said. 'Since most are illiterate, not able even to sign their names, a salon is one business they can run on their own. They are also interested in other fashion-related activities, like boutiques. But such projects would need more capital.'

The first lot of gay beauticians needs to juggle their schedules to keep the salon running. Most of them work either as waiters in nightclubs or as dancers. A few are also likely to be male sex workers who work till two in the night.

The gay business comes even as BDS stepped up lobbying to win recognition for transgender citizens.

After a transgender in Nepalgunj town in southern Nepal received a citizenship certificate where he is identified as 'both male and female', more metis want to be given similar documents recognising a third sex that is growing.

Pant and other organisation members this week went to parliament to petition Speaker Subhash Nembang. They have also met the newly appointed Minister for Women, Children and Social Welfare Khadka Bahadur Bishwokarma and sought an end to discrimination against gays that often

results in attacks.

Ironically, Bishwokarma's own Maoist party has been on a gay purge, 'jailing' two gay women and asking house-owners not to allow gay tenants.

BDS also filed an application in the Supreme Court Wednesday, asking for legal remedies against such attacks and recognition of trans-genders.

*Sudeshna Sarkar* ( © IANS / India eNews)