

Menstruation: A biological phenomenon and NOT a social stigma, Period

Dr. Meenakshi Bhatt

Kumaon University, India

Abstract

Female Menstruation is a natural biological process, a manifestation of the female reproductive abilities, so significant that the existence and proliferation of mankind are dependent on it. However, its social impact in defining the way women were perceived and treated across generations worldwide is far more significant than its biological genesis. The societal taboos related to menstruating women and their ostracization within their household has resulted in mental and physical agony for women since ages. With the passage of time, the scientific genesis of menstruation got obfuscated and obliterated in the dominant rule of patriarchal powers. Menstruation became subject of taboos instituted by religious patriarchs and individuals to oppress women and have control over their actions. The irony remains that most of these practices are defined and adopted based on the convenience and beliefs of the community or even individuals with little or no religious or scientific evidence. The study throws light on the institution of menstrual taboos across the globe, primarily India, and its effect on social and mental conditions of females. It also juxtaposes these practices against the well-established religious phenomenon of worshipping the menstruating goddess (Kamakhya) in North East India. It exposes the various ironies existing in our society and attempts to establish a narrative for the contemporary social relevance of menstrual practices and its future evolution in line with our social progression. It also advocates that amends should be made now so that women are not mocked, mistreated or embarrassed for something as natural as menstruation.

Keywords: Kamakhya; Patriarchal; Religious; Taboos; Women

1. Introduction

Ever since the inception of mankind, the female gender has been bestowed the role of a procreator. The mystical creation of God, bearer of human progeny, the one blessed with the ability to bring a new life in the world, unfortunately, is considered impure every month for five days. The five days of her periods. When a woman is pregnant the same blood provides nutrients and safety to the sprouting life in the uterus, later the little life comes enveloped in it and yet the same blood during her periods make her impure and ostracized.

Purpose/Objective

The purpose of this research work is to shed some light on the widespread menstrual taboos in India and to emphasize the need to eradicate them. These practices associated with menstruation are inconvenient, embarrassing, humiliating, discomforting, traumatic, painful and in some cases, life-threatening. This paper shares the experiences of the girls who have had to face this embarrassment in different forms. These taboos have been making the female life miserable and their condition deplorable since ages now. There is also a varying degree of restriction imposed on the females from one region to other, one family to other, one mindset to others. This paper emphasizes on the need to bring awareness about menstruation and to be at ease with it. The inhibitions around it must be released and openness about it needs to be established. Both the genders should be able to talk about it without any shame. This must be freely discussed like any other biological phenomenon. These social norms are hurdles and barriers in the way of learning, creating opportunities, enjoyment and living a normal life. Women are mocked, shamed, abandoned and banished temporarily when they need more attention and care. Every year 96922 of women in India die due to Cervical Cancer. (1) Bad menstrual hygiene practices and social impositions play a huge role in it. Poor protection and inadequate washing facilities may increase susceptibility to infection, with the odor of menstrual blood putting girls at risk of being stigmatized. The latter may have significant implications for their mental health. (Kirk J, 2006). Menstruation is as biological as the growth of nails, hair, passing urine or defecating and has a much greater significance in human existence. This paper emphasizes on the need to bring awareness about menstruation and to be at ease with it. The inhibitions around it must be released and openness about it needs to be established. Both the genders should be able to talk about it without any shame. This must be freely discussed like any other biological phenomenon

Methodology and Approach

This research paper is a result of the author's self-belief in the abolishment of this practice. The curiosity to know about what it is, how it evolved, what is the biology behind it, what are the varying lengths of stigmas attached to it, etc. has led to this research work. It is based on primary research based on interactions with various women across India on this subject, an online survey done with 45 participants representing different states of India and secondary research of related literature and recent incidences. A survey was conducted with 45 women from different states of India to know about their experiences with menstruation. The survey aimed to understand from the respondents the practices followed in their families, the restrictions they have faced during periods, the difficulties they face and how they deal with them. The survey has successfully been able to map their ideas about menstrual restrictions,

their willingness/ unwillingness to follow them and the change that has come in their life over the years.

Findings

Based on the literature review and the primary and secondary research below are some of the key areas which have been probed in detail to establish a firm understanding of menstruation as a biological phenomenon, its social dimensions and their relevance in our society today.

Menstruation, only a biological phenomenon

It is a phenomenon that happens every month in a female roughly aging between 12-50, caused by the fluctuating hormones. This fluctuation of hormones is called the menstrual cycle that results in the formation of the egg by making a thick layer on the uterus. The ovary releases it around day fourteen of the cycle, which is called ovulation. The thick lining of the uterus provides nutrients to an embryo in case of pregnancy. If pregnancy doesn't ensue, the lining drains off and flows out and results in menstruation. So, it's easy to understand what a complex biological phenomenon it is. It's neither a viral or bacterial infection nor a contagious disease. As it is a complex mechanism, there are also some side-effects attached to menstruation. Since it's an outcome of hormonal change in a female body it causes many issues like muscle contraction, bloating, fatigue, water retention, breast tenderness, migraine, nausea, emotional disturbance, mood swings and much more. Some women also suffer from menstrual disorders that cause many other health issues like thyroid, emotional imbalance, skin issues, hair fall and more. The spectrum of menstrual disorder/irregularity ranges from disorder of cycle length to disorder of flow. These include: absence of menstruation (amenorrhea), excessive or prolonged flow (menorrhagia), light, infrequent or delayed flow (oligomenorrhea), painful menstruation (dysmenorrhea) and Pre-menstrual Syndrome (PMS). (Gordley et al, 2000). So, this is clearly a medical and biological thing and should not have any societal trappings attached to it.

The Social Paradigm of Menstrual Practices

In ancient times menstrual practices were established to provide rest and comfort to the women who were in their periods. They used to be exempted from cooking, cleaning and other household chores to be given proper relaxation. But soon this practice of comfort became the practice of convenience for others. Later the patriarchs started making their own rules to ensure control over the woman. 'Don't cook because you need rest' became 'Don't cook because you are impure' and since then has continued in this form. According to one body of cultural evolutionary scholarship, the idea that menstrual blood marks the body as periodically sacred was initially established by female coalitions in their own interests, although later, with the rise of cattle-ownership and patriarchal power, these same beliefs and taboos were harnessed by religious patriarchs to intensify women's oppression. (Knight, C. 1995)

The idea of being impure during menstruation is the sole cause for all the discomfoting practices being followed and sadly the process of menstruation is less discomfoting than the restrictions enforced upon a woman by the society. The menstrual exiles have different names

in different cultures. In India it is called 'Chhoot', in Nepal, it's called 'Chaupadi', in some southern parts of India, it's called 'Thittu', which means 'Achoot'(untouchable). The biggest issue is that menstruation is something which has always been projected to us as something dirty and hence needs to be hidden. We grew up believing that it is a problem and may cause a problem for others. That is another reason why women are considered impure during menstruation.

Socio-Religious Dichotomy around Menstruation

While on one hand, we have a depressing picture of these social taboos in front of us, on the other hand, the society itself presents us with an antithetical example of worshipping a menstruating goddess. The Kamakhya Temple, situated in the lap of Neelanchal mountains in the North-Eastern part of India, seems to be opposing this practice by worshipping a bleeding Goddess. Kamakhya Temple, constructed in the 15th century is popularly believed to be an outcome of the Sati Dev Dahan¹, which also resulted in the establishment of the 51 other Shaktipeeths². Apparently, it is believed that Sati's vagina fell around Neelanchal Hills and hence Kamakhya temple was constructed there. Every year in June the Ambuvachi fair is held where thousands of devotees turn up in Kamakhya Temple to pray and worship the deity. The festival is celebrated with lots of enthusiasm and joy to rejoice womanhood. They worship the bleeding goddess and a piece of cloth soaked in red vermilion symbolizing the menstrual blood of the goddess is given as *Prasadam* (offer of the deity). The Prasad³ is distributed in two forms – Angodak and Angabastra. Angodak literally means the fluid part of the body - water from the spring and Angabastra literally means the cloth covering the body - a piece of the red cloth used to cover the stone Yoni⁴ during the days of menstruation. (Bologi, 2002) The irony remains that they worship a menstruating goddess but banish a menstruating woman from the temple premises. Let alone temple but sometimes from their own homes. It is sad and hypocritical. The temple is a symbol of the power within a woman who is capable of creation and celebrates this Shakti(power) within every woman and the same powerful woman is forbidden from entering it. This dichotomy in society is what we need to overcome to be able to fully embrace the power within every woman.

¹ Burning of Goddess Sati's body

²Major Religious pilgrimages

³Food that is served to god and that the devotees get in return from temples.

⁴Vagina

Key Research Findings

During my primary and secondary research, I found that many women have been suffering badly due to these practices. In our survey, 38% of the respondents identified ‘Past beliefs of elders’ as the primary reason for these social practices. Below diagram illustrates some of the key factors driving these practices in Indian society.

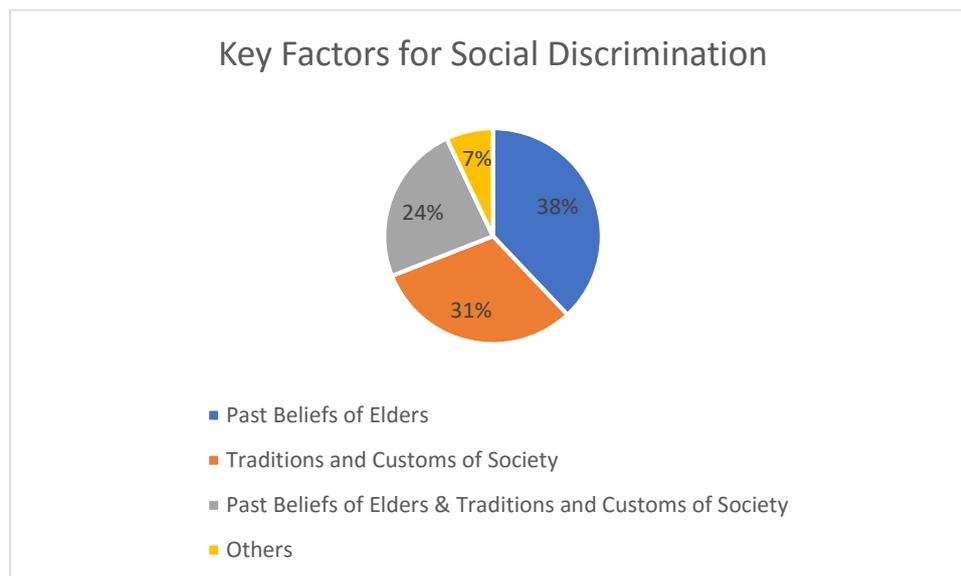


Figure 1: Key factors for Social Discrimination

Some respondents had never witnessed these practices before their marriage and experienced this cultural shock only after that. As we can see 31% of the respondents have been forced into this in the name of traditions and customs of the society. On a positive note, overall on a scale of 1 to 10 the average discrimination faced by the respondents is 2.5 which is relatively low. Only 15% of the respondents have faced high discrimination (>5 on a scale of 1 to 10). In terms of manifestation, the discrimination is evident in different forms. Some people are slightly liberal in their approach and have restricted their participation only in religious activities. On the other hand, some women are banished from the comfort of their home and are temporarily forced to live in huts or even temporary shelters outside their home. The most unfortunate incidences happen when girls lose their lives while following these practices. On Nov 21, 2018, a fourteen-year-old girl died in the south of India after a cyclone hit her hut as she was forced to sleep there by her parents while she was menstruating. Another incident happened where a 13-year-old killed herself over period shaming. The girl’s mother said that she was given a duster cloth as a sanitary pad when she got her periods for the first time by her teacher and asked to leave the class because of her period stain. This traumatized the girl to such an extent that she ended up taking her own life (News Times, 2017). The survey also helped to understand the region-wise cultural difference and practice of these taboos. In Bengal and other North-Eastern states these practices have become less popular now and have been

eradicated to a great deal. There are either no restrictions or they are very limited to performing religious activities. In the south Indian states and some northern states, these practices are still prevalent and very much believed in and followed. 'Even today, if I visit my village in Tamil Nadu—even if it is for a short while—and I happen to be on my period, I am not allowed to enter the kitchen or eat with everyone else,' says Mani Meghalai, who now lives in Delhi. "I didn't bring these ideas with me to the city, but over there—for three days every month, I am not to be touched, spoken to, or eaten with'(Clue,2019). In some regions of India, majorly in cities, education has played a vital role in overcoming these restrictions, however, there is still a long way to go. Nuclear families have also led to changing these beliefs according to evolving lifestyles of the 21st century. A few married women narrated that they still have to follow these restrictions as and when they are with the husband's parents in spite of being a non-believer in this practice. Some also narrated how their mothers have followed these practices staunchly however have never forced them into it. 98 % of the survey respondents responded that they would not like to pass on this practice to the next generation. It is really heartening to see that though there is a vast variation in the degree of suffering of individual respondents due to these practices, they are unequivocally united in acknowledging that it needs to stop now. There are many NGOs and independent social activists who have been working diligently to bring about the change in the mindsets of people and help them understand the biology behind it. Things are changing sluggishly, yet there is still a long way to go. The incidences where girls have lost their lives serving the menstrual exiles should be enough to shake us up from this perpetual blinding belief in menstrual taboos.

Conclusion/Recommendations:

Based on all the findings and individual experiences of the respondents it is evident that this kind of harassment and torture must be completely stopped in order to ensure the abolition of this evil practice. To do that, we need to get rid of this sickening mindset through education and open discussion on this topic. In a study conducted in India in 2014, the researchers found that as many as 42% of women who participated in the study did not know about sanitary pads or from where in their anatomy menstruation originated. "Most of them were scared or worried on first menstruation. (Sharanya,2018). These practices create a lot of insecurity and timidity in young girls. They bother them mentally, physically and emotionally and become a hindrance in their development and ability to accomplish greater heights as per their potential. They have little understanding of how their body functions during menstruation and what causes it, they fail to understand how normal it is to menstruate and only focus on their belief of how it can affect other people and things. They believe how they can spoil the pickle, dry up the plants, ruin food, give others sickness and impure their surroundings if they come in contact with them while menstruating. This all happens because of the lack of knowledge about it. During this study, many people told that their teachers never taught them this chapter in the biology lecture and either they accidentally got to know when they stained for the first time or their friends who menstruated earlier told them about it. That's the amount of shame we have created around menstruation and this needs to go. 80% of the survey respondents also agreed that education/awareness on this topic can only result in the abolishment of these rudimentary

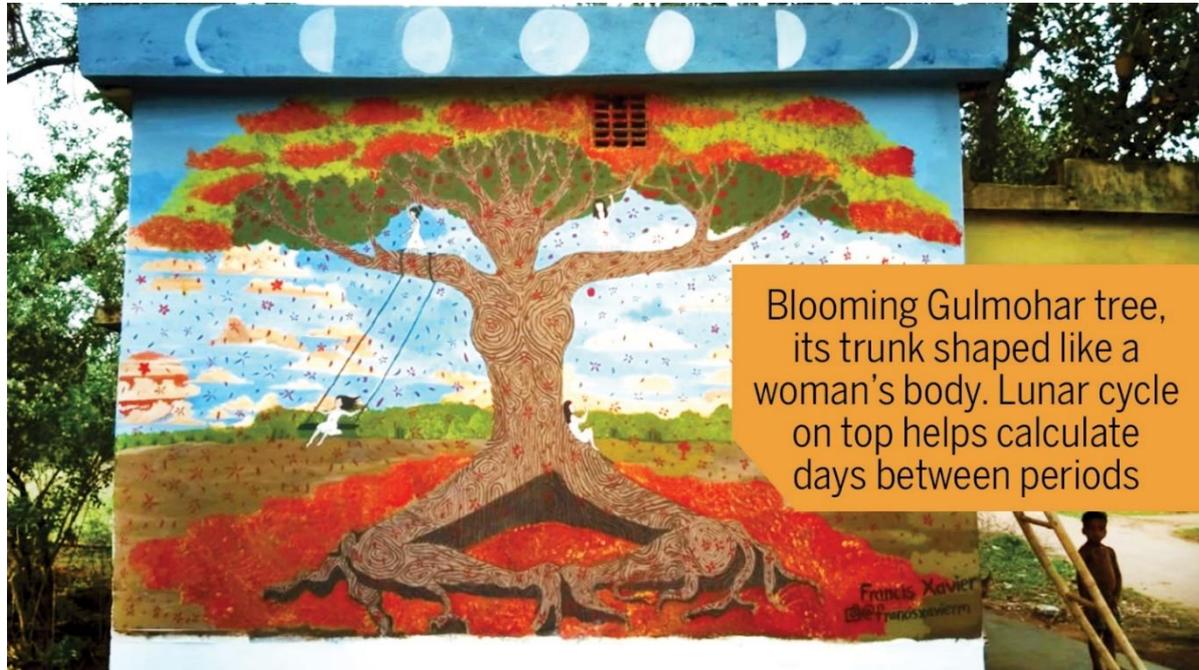
topics. Hearteningly there have been few bold initiatives already taken in pockets which now need to grow manifold. One such exemplary initiative has been taken recently in a village in Jharkhand state of India where a group of teenagers picked up their brushes to paint their heart out against the menstrual taboos. In a series of creative depictions, they send out a strong message to the society and this step would go a long way in opening the mindset of the society towards this subject. They drew some beautiful and meaningful paintings all around the villages to beat the myths related to periods and bring awareness among the villagers. This has brought some change in the mindset of the villagers who earlier used to restrict their daughters to go near the trees, touch pickles, wash hair, pluck fruits, touch other humans and so on. Below are some of the illustration painted on the prominent buildings in the village.



Figure 2: Painted on the building of a community hall, the picture shows a carefree girl sailing through her menstruation with ease and confidence

Figure 3: Painting on a community toilet

Source: https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/how-these-teenagers-are-busting-period-myths-with-paint/articleshow/70328585.cms?utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=iOSapp&utm_source=WhatsApp.com



These remarkable initiatives are progressive milestones on the way to achieving a just, rational, taboo free and myth free society and education and awareness are the two key pillars for building it. Awareness needs to be brought at two levels, one in the society and the other in the young adolescent girls so that they understand it at the right time and are not affected by any negative reactions around this natural phenomenon. We need to make the message heard loud and clear by the society “Menstruation: A biological phenomenon and NOT a social stigma, Period”.

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