

Understanding Menstruation from the Eyes of Adolescents: A Study on the Attitude of Indian Girls towards Menstruation

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Abstract—Menstruation-an important part of every woman's life is not without interference from the society and culture. The biological function of menstruation has been overtaken and manipulated by the on-going societal construction and interpretations that shape the lives of women throughout the world (Delphy 1984). In India, the attitude towards menstruation and menstrual blood is diverse and in most cases is a process of reflection of self. With the help of the issues emerging from the discussion, this article aims to throw light on the perceptions of menstruation amongst adolescent girls in India. The present study also aims to look at role of menstrual myths and taboos in shaping lives in the context of Indian women.

1. Introduction

Menstruation-an important part of every woman's life is not without interference from the society and culture. The biological function of menstruation has been overtaken and manipulated by the on-going societal construction and interpretations that shape the lives of women throughout the world (Delphy 1984). In India, the attitude towards menstruation and menstrual blood is diverse and in most cases as a process of reflection, participants were asked to create a poster together about their experience of menstruation. With the help of the issues emerging from the discussion, this article aims to throw light on the perceptions of menstruation amongst adolescent girls in India

An idea can be drawn by the implied meanings of the word for menstruation in Indian languages. Most of the languages use word similar to 'month' or 'cycle' like 'masik' in Hindi and 'maathavidai' in Tamil nonetheless there is insulting usage like 'nongra' in Bengali which means dirty or nasty signifying a derogatory attitude toward menstruation. Such perception plays an important function in disciplining and restricting women. The present study looks at role of menstrual myths and taboos in shaping lives in the context of Indian women.

Delaney et al. (1976) in *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation* gave a comprehensive history of menstrual taboos and perception around the world. In fact the word taboo comes from the Polynesian word 'tapua' which itself means menstruation. Taboos of menstrual exclusion were born out of reason like fear of blood and the supernatural power it contained. The primitive man respected menstrual blood out of his fear for the unknown mystery within the female body which also coincided with the lunar cycle. On one hand women were holy, pious and inviolable and on the other, they were polluted and unclean and even harmful. The paradox was clearly evident in contradictory beliefs like of that of a virgin's sanitary pad's therapeutic ability which was completely opposed to the idea that menstruating women caused blindness or death or crop blight. The practice was not just limited to exclusion. The taboos around food among the hunting gathering tribes. Menstruating women were deliberated as unlucky for hunting. Even the husband of a menstruating woman was not allowed to participate. Food cooked by her was dangerous and not fit for consumption. Even today such beliefs persist that mayonnaise will not set and pickles will go sour if touched or even seen by a menstruating woman. This study will look into the most prevalent myths in some of the major communities of India and try to link them with the overall condition of women (Delaney et al 1976).

2. Methodology

Sixty female students in the age group of sixteen to eighteen years from different communities were contacted and a mixed method was used for data collection. Quantitative analysis included study of 60 on-going High-School girls and qualitative analysis included Focus Group Discussion (FGD) of fifteen key informants based on their reply in the prior session. Open ended questions were asked about menstrual taboos, myths and practices in one session of around two

hours and focus group discussion was held in another session for one hour followed by poster making. They were instructed not to write their name on the answer sheet to keep their identity confidential but were asked to mention their religion and caste to gain better ethnic understanding. All the girls in the study had completed Matriculation and had information regarding the biological aspect of menstruation. An in-depth discussion was held towards the end of the session to reason such behavior and to transform negative attitudes towards menstruation. A poster was created by key informants to help unleash suppressed feelings towards the societal pressure that the participant experienced in their day to day lives

3. Findings

It was found that menstrual etiquette required women hide the fact that they were menstruating particularly from men. Women should act as if they never menstruate or at least keep it a private affair without drawing any attention to it. Concealment was important and prior preparation was necessary to disguise any outward sign of menstruation (O'Flynn 2006). In some communities isolation was an imperative. Amongst the Malayalis of Kerala and Tamilians of Tamil Nadu, menstruating women stayed in separate rooms and were not allowed to touch or be touched. In the past women had to sleep in the backyard outside their homes but since urbanization has reduced the living space, women have been allowed to stay within the same room (only if a spare room is not available), nonetheless they have to sleep on the floor. In case of contact with a male, he has to take a bath to purify himself. Women were not allowed to take bath until the end of periods (at least 4 days) as menstruation had a polluting effect on water. (Whereas, among Odia Brahmins the practice was different. It was mandatory for women to shower immediately after 'Rajasdharshan' or beginning of menstruation.) Menstruating girls were not allowed to touch the clothes kept in a closet. "My mother gets clothes from the cupboard for me when I am in periods. I am not allowed to touch it. If I touch then the others will not touch anything from that cupboard. All the clothes will have to be washed. If I and mom are both in period then we have to ask a male member to get it for us. But he doesn't give it to us directly. He would leave it on the floor and we pick the clothes when he is gone" replied a Malayali respondent. (Similar practice was also found in the Marwari community from Rajasthan).

Girls from Marwadi community of Rajasthan were not allowed to touch or even see pickles during menses as it is believed that these will turn sour; and poppadums would turn red. They were instructed not to eat sour, sweet and spicy food and one participant told that she was never allowed to see, touch or drink milk during periods. Women were strictly not allowed to enter kitchen and prayer spaces (including marriage, birth and crematory rituals). Though it provided rest during periods, in today's world where nuclear families are the norm, it creates a burden on the family. After they purified themselves by taking a shower, washing all the clothes worn

during menstruation and cleaning everything that was touched by them during the four days (some cases a week) they are permitted to re-enter kitchen and holy places.

Touching trees and fruits is also forbidden, especially scared plants like Tulsi which is believed to wither if touched by a menstruating woman. Some people still strongly believe in these practices. One participant from Sindhi community narrated an episode of a girl who had lost her mind while walking under a peepal (*Ficus religiosa*) tree during her period- 'I know most girls don't believe all this in the present times but I know of someone who went insane after walking under a peepal tree in her periods. I would rather change my path or not go at all if there is a peepal tree on the way. The girls who do not follow these ancient rules often ended up in psychiatric wards.

The attitude towards menstrual cloth switched between dirty and/or magical. Odia Brahmin girls said that they had to dispose used sanitary pads immediately without anyone seeing them as the sight of menstrual blood caused back luck. Respondents also shared anecdotes about people and animals going blind at its sight. Menstrual blood also seemed to be capable of attracting ghosts. Marwari girls would never go out alone at the time of menstruation. In case of the inevitable, carrying any iron object is a must. A person accompanying a menstruating girl is also under the threat of being attacked by a ghost. Similar evidence was found in a study by Khanna et al (2005) which said "In rural areas especially, girls during menstruation are instructed not to pass through crossroads since it is believed that during this period they may be caught by evil spirits and become mad."

Not everywhere is menstruation an object of concealment. Paradoxically, when the rest of the world is busy hiding, the onset of menstruation is celebrated in Odia communities from Odisha. Such practice is unthinkable in the Western world. At the end of first menstruation the girl is gifted new clothes and ornaments and has to go to the temple to offer Puja. Later relatives visit the girl and bless her. Not only individually but as a community Odias celebrate the Raja festival- a four daylong celebration of Mother Earth's menses. The word Raja comes from the Sanskrit word Rajaswala which means 'menstruating woman'. Raja festival coincides with the onset of monsoon which is believed to make earth fertile just like menstruation which makes a woman fertile. Unmarried young girls are indulged with tasty food and sweets, new clothes and ornaments. They do not have to work during these four days and spend time having fun playing indoor games with other young girls (Apffel-Marglin 1994). The Ambubachi celebration of Kamakshya temple in Assam is also a celebration of the menstruation of Goddess Sati (Chawla 1994).

Similar menarchal celebratory practices are also common in South India. A participant from Kerala, residing in an urban city recalls it to be the most embarrassing incident of her

life. Her friends were from not from Kerala. She refused to be a part of this ceremony as it made her feel different. 'We are given new clothes and everyone is invited. It is like flaunting my periods and I found it very embarrassing. None of my friend would have to do this because they were not from Kerala. In the end my family took me to our village and organized the ceremony.' On enquiring whether she thought this had a positive effect on the lives of women because it seemed quite liberating on the exterior, she denied vehemently saying it was just a way to make the news public that the girl is now matured and ready to get married. In fact she believed it was 'cheap publicity'. Menstruation was a taboo in most religions unlike Sikhism which allowed menstruating women to enter Gurudwaras (temples) and conduct prayers.

Agerstoun et al (2007) stated that 'Feminist activist art is characterized here as simultaneously critical, positive, and progressive' which has been utilized here. Works of menstrual artists (activists) like 'menstruate with pride' by Sarah Maple (Proudman 2012) and 'red is the colour' by Ingrid Berthon-Moine (Gallego2011) was shown during the FGD. At the end the participants were encouraged to create a poster on the basis of their experience and learning from the session. It can be said that poster making was a tool of feminist activism in this study. In this attempt to create feminist activist art a white sheet of paper was handed out to the group with the freedom to create a group art about menstruation and the restrictive practices related to it. The end product was a bright poster cut out in the shape of a sanitary pad with pictographic representation in bold colors and slogans named as 'It's my bloody right'. The poster showed signs of ambivalence. The slogan 'proud to b [sic] a woman' had been etched in the Centre with an emphasis on the word 'woman' by inscribing it in gold implying that women were as precious as gold but very close to that, blood tears were shed by a lone eye depicting pain. An earnest plea that said 'wish men bleed' reflected the 'other' factor of women from men who did not bleed and were thus not the same. Overall the poster showed signs of protest and emancipation with words like 'bloody fight, bloody right', 'I have wings', 'I am bleeding with pride so no one dare make fun of it'. One Muslim participant shared her realisation after creating the poster saying 'I don't believe that I am weak because of menstruation but everyone around me makes me feel inferior. I am not going to let them do it again.' Clearly, it was a moment of liberation for her.

3. Conclusion

The study is limited to urban young girls only and it would be interesting to probe further by studying rural women and older women to gain more ideas about menstrual taboos. Menstruation and myth surrounding it has limited women's opportunities and freedom. Young girls from poor background often have to quit school because of the absence of toilets in many Government schools. Instead improving facilities for women by focussing on health and hygiene, a lot of unnecessary stress is on barbaric restrictive practices which curb participation in almost all aspects of woman life. Women are almost invisible in sports because of the myth surrounding exercise and menstruation. Women do not travel while menstruating and thus lose out on social and economic opportunities. Caste based untouchability was abolished in India right after independence but even today a menstruating woman is treated like an untouchable. She does not have the right to cook and to access nutritious food which results in increase in the number of cases of anaemia, reproductive diseases and maternal mortality. All these can be dealt with, but, for the society accustomed to treat menstruating women as outsider, it is mandatory that these practices are revisited and reformed to save the future generation of women from suffering in silence.

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