



Research Paper

## Impact of cultural beliefs on the perception and management of menstruation in rural India

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### Abstract

This paper aims to understand the impact of cultural beliefs on the perception and management of menstruation in rural India. I will examine the different aspects of a woman's social surroundings and what impacts her beliefs. After which, I'll delve deeper into what beliefs are followed and whether they are positive or negative. This paper will be based on my own findings and my understanding of other research papers on similar topics. This qualitative research will examine different mythologies, taboos, superstitions that have been passed on to families since time in memorial. I have more specifically written about the cultural shock that a girl child faces during menarche. She is taught to keep it a secret- not to be shared with others. Thus, the focal point of my study was to find out why women thought of menstruation as a shame, pollutant and a restriction.

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### I. Introduction

Every 25 days, a woman's body prepares itself to conceive. If no pregnancy occurs, marked by a miss in the menstrual cycle, the uterus sheds its lining and parts blood and some body tissues from the body. Menstruation is a natural phenomenon experienced by women worldwide, for about 2-8 days every month, yet looked upon with shame in rural India. However natural it might be, it's considered to be a source of impurity—something which is not to be discussed openly. While there may be a lot of factors that play a role in developing such a mindset, I believe culture is the most significant. Culture, though, is a multifaceted complex term which is not a concrete concept, but something dynamic and ever evolving. According to Edward Taylor, a British anthropologist during the seventh century said that “culture in its wide ethnographic sense means the complex whole which includes knowledge, laws, beliefs, morals, custom, and all other capabilities acquired by a person as a member of society” Its building blocks are based on interpersonal communication, perception, attributional thinking, socialising agents, and contextual activation of cultural paradigms.

The cultural landscape of rural India is based on the the same definition that is inclusive of traditional, deep-rooted beliefs and practices. At least six in every ten Indians continue to live in rural are (news india express by S. Chandrashekhar on 2nd October, 2023) as, thus the mentality of so many Indians continues to be shaped in such a way. In different cultures around the world, menstruation has in some places been defined as a term surrounded by taboos, myths and restrictions intended to protect the women and the community.

This qualitative research study aims to explore the influence of cultural beliefs on menstruation practices in rural India, shedding light on the interplay between cultural norms, traditions, and taboos that shape the society's perceptions and behaviours surrounding menstrual health. If menstruation is actually a gift from a higher power and a blessing that symbolises the dignity and power of womanhood, why is it that the beliefs which have been passed on from one generation, succeeded in creating an image of impurity, disgust associated to a very normative aspect of a woman's life-menstruation?

### II. Literature Review

Across different writings, it is commonly found that sociocultural interactions do have a very significant role in shaping menstruation.

The epic Mahabharata, the story of Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas, intricately mentions menstruation. Once, in exile, when the Pandavas were living in disguise, they owned a magical vessel which endlessly supplied food. One day, while Draupadi was on her periods, she accidentally touched the vessel,

causing it to lose its magical power. Consequently, the Pandavas were unable to obtain food from the vessel at that period of time.

Draupadi, distressed by her unintended mistake, approached Lord Krishna (a god of the Hindus) for guidance. Krishna counselled her to pray to the Surya—the sun god. Draupadi then fasted and performed rigorous penance. After being pleased by her devotion, Surya enabled Krishna to control the vessel's power which allowed food to be prepared even during her menstrual cycle. This story has been interpreted in several ways in India. Some people think that because Draupadi touched the vessel during her menstruation, the vessel lost its power because she was impure. However, some people started seeing women as power during their menstruation. This story has thus shaped so many cultures in different ways which causes different perceptions on menstruation in different socio-cultural contexts.

### **History of the word menstruation**

In ancient Greece, woman's menstrual bleeding was considered a celestial event, or connecting one to the moon, tides and the lunar cycle. Thus, the term "menstruation" is etymologically related to "moon".

In the third century B.C., the Greek physician Herophilus became responsible for many great advances in gynaecology. He was first to understand and describe the ovaries and the fallopian tubes. He then gave them appropriate Greek names in medical textbooks, where before they were described with euphemisms such as *aidoia*, meaning 'the shameful parts'.

### **Indian mythology**

The origin of the myth that menstruation is a pollutant dates back to the Vedic times and has often been linked to Indra's slaying of Vritras (brahmanas). It is mentioned in the Vedas that the guilt of killing a brahmana appears every month as menstrual flow because women had taken it upon themselves as a part of Indra's guilt. This explains why, in this faith, Hindu women are prohibited from participating in normal life while menstruating. Before entering her normal routine, she must be "purified".

However, due to advancements in science, this myth has been proven wrong. Even though it is known to families in rural villages that menstruation is related to pregnancy, they continue to believe these deeply embedded myths and mores that are passed on to them by their ancestors.

### **The onset of menarche**

A significant event at the onset of menarche is the first occurrence of menstruation in a young girl. It is typically celebrated as a rite of passage and marks the transition from childhood to womanhood. It usually comes as a shock to girls because it is talked about in their families earlier. This lack of awareness leads to shame, fear, disgust and confusion. For most women in India, the immediate response to menarche is feeling dirty and being subjected to new restrictions on their activities like not being able to cook or perform holy rituals. The social and cultural contexts which construct the ideas of a woman's body include their mothers upbringing and the father's alienation towards it. When a girl of mere age 12 fearfully tells her mother that she's bleeding, she's asked to remain soft and calm as if nothing happened.

The body goes through so many changes at once that it becomes scary for her. These changes include the development of breasts wherein hormonal changes trigger the development of breast tissue, resulting in growth. Around this time, girls may experience a rapid growth spurt as their bodies undergo significant changes. This growth spurt is driven by hormonal changes and typically occurs before the growth plates in the bones close. Hormonal changes during puberty also lead to the growth of body hair, including underarm hair and pubic hair which is a normal part of the maturation process and is a common change that occurs during menarche. As girls go through menarche, they may experience changes in their body shape, including the development of curves and a widening of the hips. These changes are driven by hormonal fluctuations and are part of the normal development process. They experience an increase in oil production in the skin, which leads to acne breakouts, as well as changes in their skin texture and complexion.

### **Being considered dirty**

In certain villages in India, such as those in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Bihar, these restrictions on women during menstruation are particularly rigid and stringent. Women in these villages are not only prohibited from entering the kitchen during their periods, but they are also often forced to stay in separate quarters or huts away from the rest of the family.

These practices are deeply rooted in cultural and religious beliefs, with women being considered impure and unclean during menstruation. As a result, they are often marginalised and treated as second-class citizens in their own homes.

Despite efforts to educate and empower women, these restrictions continue to be enforced in many parts of India, perpetuating gender inequality and discrimination. It is crucial for society to challenge these harmful beliefs and practices and work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable environment for women.

In some parts of India, strict dietary restrictions are also imposed. Food items like curd, tamarind, and pickles are usually avoided by menstruating girls. For them, it is believed that such foods will disturb or stop the menstrual flow.

In orthodox or Brahmin families, menstruating women are asked to stay away from domestic activities for a period of three days and physical intimacy is prohibited. Likewise, different religions in rural India have different restrictions and views. In a few Hindu families, mensuration is also celebrated instead of being considered as a shame. Women from all over the village come together and hold a ceremony to mark the age of maturity for the girl. In a few communities, there is a tradition called "Ritushuddhi" or "Ritushodhakam," celebrates a girl's first menstruation. During this ceremony, the girl is adorned with special clothing, jewellery, and flowers. Female family members and friends gather to offer blessings and advice on womanhood, including guidance on hygiene, health, and familial responsibilities. This ritual also often includes prayers and offerings to deities, followed by a celebratory meal with traditional dishes. After the ceremony, the girl is considered to have transitioned into womanhood and is typically welcomed into the community as such.

### **Unhygienic ways used during menstruation**

Women generally use sanitary napkins, tampons, clothes, or other products to prevent blood stains from being visible during menstruation. In India, 42% of adolescent women exclusively used hygienic methods (Aditya Singh et al. BMC Public Health. 2022.), with substantial geographic disparities at the state and district levels which implicitly means that a substantial proportion of women are unaware of the concept of a sanitary napkin or tampon. Women in rural areas soak blood using dirty cloths, rags, and in some conditions, even sand or leaves. The use can result in several unfavourable health outcomes, including reproductive tract infections. Also, poor menstrual hygiene can at large contribute to female morbidity. Inability to manage menstrual hygiene can have serious consequences for their physical, mental, and emotional health, as well as their social development and educational attainment.

Also, due to the shame of periods, some people bury the old, used clothes in the sand to discard them so that no one can see or know.

Hygiene among rural women is a major public health concern for policymakers in low- and middle-income countries, including India. Thus, from a policy-making standpoint, a better understanding of the factors which lead to lower demand for hygienic absorbents in rural areas, as well as examining variations across India's districts, is critical to achieve safe menstrual hygiene.

### **Social interactions- empowerment and shaping beliefs**

Social interactions for rural women are deeply rooted in their community dynamics and shapes their everyday life and belief system. These interactions revolve around their neighbours, friends, community members, family etc. Rural areas are home to interpersonal relations because of the minimal size of the village. It is said that "everyone knows everyone" due to daily life activities that take place in one's social environment. These activities include gathering water by the *ghats* (a wide set of steps descending to a river) where women meet each other, discuss their families, husbands and kids. They share with each other different stories or values that tend to influence each other's opinions. These stories could be related to taboos or superstitions regarding topics like menstruation also. Social gatherings like weddings, religious festivals, and community celebrations serve as important occasions for women to connect, share news, and participate in rituals and ceremonies.

Self help groups are another collective grouping of women in rural areas who take up opportunities for skill development and empowerment. In Madhya Pradesh, many self help groups took up the initiative to set up their own small machines to produce sanitary napkins by establishing market links with institutions. To work at night, they had removed bulbs from their own houses which portrayed a sense of desire for change. Thus, the mindset of the people has started changing slowly. The men mostly didn't object because of the monetary gains that the production provided. All sanitary napkins that were produced by these women were bought by established institutions and then distributed free of cost to other rural women. In the Jarga village, women have taken up this initiative and have stuck to it ever since. They have helped other women in different villages to do the same. Rajkumari Devi, a villager at Jarga, said that sanitary napkins was something she had never seen before, but the opportunity to start producing them has opened new gates of life and given her a sense of motivation. (personal communication)

### III. Conclusion

In essence, culture and social surroundings do have a very significant impact on the perception and the practices related to menstruation. Women today still perceive it as a shame and secret from the rest of the family and community. It is essential that policy makers work towards raising the dignity and life of a woman by initiating programmes and policies that educate and empower women. Educating these women about how it's a natural phenomenon is of utmost priority so that they learn how to take care of themselves and perceive it positively. This will reduce the rates of female morbidity and infections. The switch from dirty products to sanitary products should be initiated and SHGs should learn from each other to build a system of independence and empower themselves. This can be done through starting small factory outlets and other initiatives supported by the government.

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