

# ASSESSING MENSTRUAL AWARENESS & ACTIVISM IN ASSAM

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*Menstruation, both as a physical and cultural process has been evolving among human societies since time immemorial. However, over the course of time, cultural beliefs and practices of menstruation has been seen inseparably attached with the biological interpretation of menstruation. Patriarchal cultures all across the human world have been using this biological aspect of female body to socially define women and disfavour the menstrual body into a symbolic cultural object burdened with set rules and taboos. From Victorian west to religiously diverse oriental culture as well as ethnically rich African societies; menstruation has been a socio-cultural construct rooted in different menstrual practices, rituals and perceptions. The root of menstrual culture is so much delved in taboos such as purity and pollution, dirt and hygiene etc. that it was not included in the serious academic research for a very long time. However, with the wake of feminism and ethnographic research in Anthropology; menstruation has been studied and theorized by various disciplines both in social sciences as well as medical studies. But, as the menstrual discourse needs more than theoretical understanding; over the course of time a spat of menstrual activism started all over the globe under various movements such as Red Tent, Free-Bleeding, Sanitary Pad movement etc. These movements, although claim themselves to be based on feminist praxis; most of them are still in an infant and ambiguous stage which is not able to reach the common women. Even in India, although menstrual talk is what is taking internet by storm, is still an unknown arena to most women. Therefore, in this paper, I would like to understand the debates, dilemmas and future of this movements in a culture like Assam, India where menstrual culture is very strong both in theory and practice.*

Keywords: Menstruation, Menstrual Culture, Menstrual Activism, Assam

Menstruation as a tabooed phenomenon can be equated to a system of discrimination against women (George, 2012). It imposes numerous restrictions on women which is present among all the cultures around the world (George, 2012). However, the degrees and relativity of these taboos varies across cultures. As Beauvoir (1970) says, these taboos of menstruation can be broadly categorized as the menstruating woman's diet, communication, daily activities, arrangements of her living during those days as well as clothing. In certain cultures, including Asia, women while menstruating should observe menstrual restrictions in regard to cooking, god worshipping, touching holy objects and people especially males and avoiding sunlight (Kissling, 1996). Other than these, prohibition of sex during menstruation is one of the major taboos among them which is followed by majority of religion and cultures across the world (Dube, 1988). Among all the cultures observing menstrual taboos, cultures like Indian and Nepalese mostly in Hindu and some parts of Muslim religion are prominent and have been studied extensively (ibid.).

Strict menstrual taboos result in various menstrual stigma affecting especially adolescent girls in their emotional well-being, sexuality as well as lifestyle (Bhardwaj and Patkar, 2004). In the context of South Asian countries (i.e. India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan) where menstrual taboos and myths have a very strong hold, event of menstruation is almost a matter of shame. Even though there is no scientific justification and clarification of menstrual blood as hazardous, the society socializes both men and women to consider it as dirty, impure and a phenomenon to hide from society. Isolation or shunning is a part of socializing the stigma deep rooted in women during menstruation due to which the knowledge building on this subject is very backward. The

menstrual myths and taboos have not only led to various stigma and personality defects in women mostly in South Asian countries, but also a ton of reproductive health problems due to improper hygiene practices along with neglected healthcare of women as second sex (ibid). Menstrual taboos have created such a stigmatic field in these developing countries where menstruation is almost a tabooed subject as sex which is not discussed properly by even a mother and a daughter. In his reflatory study, Das (2008) said that in most of these societies, talking about tabooed subjects are considered transgressive and shunning of the cultural being of the person who is initiating these talks. In this context, talking about menstrual issues and problems are often numbed even among women in such patriarchal societies which also generates the backwardness of knowledge formation in regard to these tabooed topics (ibid.)

### **Objective/s**

The primary objective of this study is to understand the present bio-cultural patterns of Menstrual Behaviour in Assamese society. Also, further importance is given to understand the notions and ideas about menstrual health/hygiene awareness especially among young people and how it works along the ongoing menstrual movement in India.

### **Research Methodology**

A total of 98 people (72 women and 26 men) were included as sample for the study both in individual and group basis. The sample group included caste Hindu Assamese, minority groups (Muslims, Christians, Bengali Hindus, Marwaris, Biharis, Jains), indigenous tribes and sub tribes (Bodos, Mishings, Sonowals and Deuris) living in Assam. The study was chiefly conducted in 10 schools in various parts of Assam along with 3 NGOs (Non-Governmental organizations) working for the health and development of women.

As this kind of complex bio-cultural studies involve a potential of mutual realities rather than singular objective reality; qualitative research method such as Ethnographic Method was used to understand the field better. Snowball as well as Referral sampling techniques were used to optimize the sample group and have a study with the participants. The data was largely collected through Focus Group Discussions and In-depth interviews along with semi-structured interview guide was also used for the purpose of this study. Use of pseudonyms was done to mark the privacy of the participants as many of them were hesitant initially to talk on a tabooed subject. Content Analysis method was used invariably in interpreting data.

### **Menstruation and Culture in Assam**

Menstruation has long been a subject of taboo and control in various parts of South Asian societies such as in India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Burma etc. However, the practices and rituals of menstruation within this region is sporadic and varies from culture to culture with a few commonality of menstrual symbolism such as – purity/pollution concept, fertility/menstrual relationship and expectations, the surveillance on the menstrual body etc (Dube, 1988). Patriarchal undertone visible in the whole performance and practice of menstruation is very important to note here. In India, especially in the concerned field of study- Assam, menstruation is defended through various mythic menstrual cosmologies under which the menstrual body is subjected to surveillance and objectification.

If we trace the origin of menstrual taboos and restrictions, the communities living in Assam especially the Hindus believe it to be centered around the Goddess Kamakhya. However, there can be found no written history on menstruation apart from the Hindu mythological books such as *Yogini Tantra* and *Kalika Purana*.

Also, as an attachment of the subject to the Kamakhya Goddess, people of Assam traces menstruation back from the time of celebrating Ambubasi Mela or *Amoti* every year during monsoon when it is believed that the goddess menstruates. However, the

irony lies in the fact that how on the one hand the menstrual ritual is celebrated for the goddess Kamakhya and women in general with menstruation are a threat to sacredness. The only positive outcome can be that this festival provides a space for understanding female body in an empowered form.

The menstrual taboos and rituals in Assam is also based on the culture of silence as their other national counterparts. However, the degrees and detailed nature in which these are performed are very much grounded in Assamese cultural beliefs as well the perception towards it in every household. However, ritual bath on the third day is performed by almost every woman in Assamese society if not religious but making it an ethnic symbol of the society. The ritual bath consists a head bath along with washing off every washable objects she has touched over the course of time including bed linens, curtains, cushion covers etc. Those items which can be washed such as money or furniture are sprinkled with holy water. Even after her ritual bath on the third day, an Assamese woman can't enter into the kitchen before keeping a night long fast praying God to purify her mind from evil. After this, she can enter into kitchen along with prayer halls. However, she can't visit a public prayer hall or temple if she is bleeding even after fourth day.

Menstruation in Assam has a very special bond with Menarche or first blood ritual. Considered to the puberty or initiation ritual across the world, menarche ritual is practiced in Assam along with other places in India such as some parts of Maharashtra, Kerala, Tamilnadu, Orissa etc. In this context, one can refer to Leela Dube (1988) and her tremendous amount of detailed work in menstruation rituals in Hindu culture. Menarche ritual is often linked to the process of blossoming where a girl is believed to enter into womanhood through this. In Assam, menarche ritual is called *Tuloni Biya* or *Puspotsav* where puberty is considered to be *pushpa* (flower) and the girl attaining it is called *pushpita* (the blossomed flower). In this way, menarche is considered to be a mark of her fertility.

The *Tuloni Biya* is symbolically understood as a wedding which is to be celebrated for seven days to mark a girl as woman. The literal meaning of *tuloni* is lifted and a girl attaining it is considered lifted or levelled up into adulthood or womanhood after this ritual (Das, 2008). When a girl experiences her first period or *tuloni*, she is kept aloof in a room from the sight of men or boys and even the sunlight as Sun in Hindu cultural belief is a male God. The girl is considered to be immensely impure or *chua laga* and she is made to sleep on a stray bed or a mat with minimum clothing. In these days, she can only eat fruits, milk or jaggery as cooked meal is prohibited for her. On the fourth day, she is given a ritual bath under a banana plant. Her body is smeared with *maah-halodhi* (black lentils and raw turmeric) and her forehead is adorned with *sindoor* (vermillion). During the ritual bath, no male can enter the premises and women sings folk songs with sexual content as a statutory warning to what sex contains and how she should preserve her virginity for one man-her husband only. After the ritual bath, the girl is dressed as a grown woman in traditional *mekhela sador* (Assamese saree) and jewellery preferably gold. In this day, or some other day, a community feast is arranged to celebrate her puberty for family, neighbours and friends. As a part of tradition, the girl is adorned with gifts from the relatives and merry making is used to mark the special occasion of her life.

### Menstrual Health Awareness in Assam

The people of the Assam live in a very conservative society when it comes to menstruation. They value their traditional and cultural norms, and regard discussing issues pertaining to culture in public as disrespectful. In both the tribal and non-tribal cultures in Assam, it is a cultural practice and belief that girls of pre-menarche and men are not supposed to know anything concerning menstruation or see menstrual blood, and that reproductive health issues are not supposed to be discussed in public, as this is a taboo. Hence menstruation except menarche ritual is kept secret. This culture of silence leads to misunderstandings and lack of knowledge of menstruation and the menstrual process among the men and pre-pubertal girls. There is also a belief that menstrual blood can be used for black magic, hence if somebody knows that a female is menstruating she can be bewitched. In this study, it

could be clearly seen that traditional beliefs and practices have strong influence on information and knowledge of menarche and menstruation, especially in Brahmaputra valley in Assam, where these topics are not properly discussed in homes and with close family members. Hence it did not come as a surprise that the study revealed that most girls learn about coming of age from their friends. However, there is the danger that such peer advice can be wrong, as most of the girls, who provide advice, have limited knowledge of menstruation and menstrual hygiene issues themselves.

FGDs (Focus Group Discussion) were undertaken as research technique in the present study at 10 schools in Assam revealed that the respondents' knowledge of the process of the female biological cycle, especially menstruation and hence the issue of menstrual hygiene was grossly insufficient. This pertained especially to the girls attending government schools, whilst girls in mission schools, in comparison, fared better. This study also revealed that the topic of menstruation and reproductive health in government schools was not part of the curriculum at any level, hence not taught at all. Not unexpectedly this was found to be deplorable by the majority of those respondents who attended government schools, and who consequently expressed their desire to have the topic included in their curriculum, as they felt they needed guidance and support regarding coming of age and reproductive health issues at school and at home. This made the girls to realize the importance of education on reproductive health and especially menstrual process and menstrual hygiene both in schools and homes for the gaps in knowledge to be filled in.

The traditional initiation rituals practiced by mostly the caste Hindu community in Assam frequently prevented the girls from attending school, resulting in their lagging behind academically. Thereby the rituals ultimately put the girls' school careers at risk, and on top of that, they also caused mental stress and, to a lesser extent, created unsuitable hygienic practices, as well as fear and shame. The latter again added to the girls' mental stress. Furthermore, the rituals were prone to promote untimely sexual debuts, leading to early marriages, teenage pregnancies and infections, jeopardizing the girls' school careers, as well as their physical and mental health. Another example of a cross-cutting factor worthwhile highlighting was poverty, both personal and structural. In line with the rituals, but to a much larger extent, it also hindered the girls applying hygienic menstrual practices, thereby constituting a health risk, but also prompting shame and fear. At the same time, due to their and their families' poverty, the girls felt discouraged from attending classes on their critical days, as they were unable to walk long distances without proper pads, whilst the schools, out of reasons of structural poverty, could not provide the necessary facilities in terms of water, toilets, showers and disposal sites. In other words, the schools could not offer the girls what they needed most in the days they had their periods – privacy, wellbeing, safety and comfort, and the absence of mental and physical stress.

Therefore, this study has shown that ignoring proper menstrual hygiene has a negative impact on the health and education of girls in the state of Assam. The same pertains to their setting, i.e. family and school, which do not provide proper conditions for them to maintain a good standard of menstrual hygiene, although this is found to be of great importance to their physical, mental, and social wellbeing. A main conclusion must be that improved knowledge and practices of menstrual hygiene, as well as a better environment in terms of facilities and services for its proper management will lead to decreased vulnerability to infections and other maladies, higher self-esteem and ultimately to better academic performances at school. The limitation of this study to only Brahmaputra valley in Assam does not allow its results to be generalized, although many of the study's findings are confirmed by other studies in other developing countries. This highlights the need for more scientific research in the subject matter area of the present study, in order to better understand the negative impacts associated with poor menstrual hygiene on the physical, mental and social wellbeing of girls.

### Menstrual Activism in Assam: The Road Ahead

For ages, menstruation has been a tabooed matter to cultures across the world. Menstrual awareness in terms of health and gender was more of a textbook thing adopted by different disciplines in various studies directly and indirectly. Even the medical studies on menstrual health of menstruation was not free from taboos. Breaking of cultural taboos in menstruation was considered more of a radical feminist intervention (Bobel, 2010). The medical handbooks on menstruation painted it a dirty affair and kept the subject in a taboo standstill.

However, with the rise of various international and national movements such as Red Tent, Haiku, Happy to Bleed, Sanitary Pad Movement, Free Bleeding etc. the issue of menstruation has been able to catch public eye. In India, it started with an Indian origin poet Rupi Kaur's controversial post on Instagram on menstrual bleeding which took internet by storm. In March of this year, Rupi Kaur who was working on a series of photo depicting menstruation and body, posted a picture of her sleeping in a blood stained pajama. This post created much furor when some people reported this picture to be obscene and Instagram deleted it under the banner of breaching community guidelines. The same pic was again brought into viewership when Kaur and many women groups publicly made an appeal to Instagram for destigmatizing women's bodies. In her exact words "I will not apologize for not feeding the ego and pride of misogynist society that will have my body in an underwear but not be okay with a small leak. When your pages are filled with countless photos/accounts where women (so many who are underage) are objectified, pornified and treated less than human. thank you" (Source, Instagram)

After Rupi Kaur's issue, menstruation has been taken up by digital media in various web series in internet along with Bollywood movies such as *Padman* where it was attempted to break the stigma and silence around the topic of menstruation.

In the context of Assam, menstrual activism started along the lines of Pan-Indian menstrual movement brought out by digital as well as social media in most of the cases. Also certain laws such as removing tax on sanitary pad, Sabarimala verdict made many aware of the fact that even government is taking the subject in a positive way. Although there has been a growing divide among people who want to preserve menstrual taboos in the name of culture and people supporting menstrual rights of women as their bodily rights; the end result of these movement has become complex and often gets debated under the context of health and hygiene only.

In Assam, there has been various NGOs who are taking up the job to sensitize people about menstrual health. Even Assam government under Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission has collaborated with an NGO called *Gunj* to make and commercialize low cost sanitary machines such as Sakhi in even the remotest area of the state. Also there has been organizations such as *Parijat Academy* which is training many underprivileged women in their workshop for making reusable menstrual products under the banner of Pad Women.

However, the interesting fact to be noted here is that, the menstrual activism in Assam is limited to menstrual health awareness only where menstruation as a stigmatized cultural subject has not been discussed by anyone. Menstruation and body rights are still a far-fetched goal in Assamese cultural landscape. Even the health awareness missions have not been able to reach to women who are not active in social media.

In that case, Menstrual activism in Assam is growing, but in a different direction. To become a complete movement, we are yet to take menstruation from the chain of taboos and understand it from the point of body and freedom.

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