

Menstruation, Social Taboos and Dogra Women

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Abstract

Menstruation is a taboo subject in India. Women are considered “impure” during their period and are subjected to various social, religious and cultural restrictions. These restrictions have excluded women from their daily activities. According to UNICEF India report (2008), Menstruation is also surrounded by many myths or taboos, while menstruation is an indication that a women’s reproductive system is healthy, in religious doctrine, it is interpreted differently. Menstrual taboos exclude women and girls from many aspects of social and cultural life. Some of these are helpful, but others have harmful implications. The present study using purposive and random sampling method has attempted to study various social taboos attached with the process of menstruation among village females of Jammu area. The study examined the various factors influencing the practice of social taboos and the perceptions of the girls regarding these menstrual taboos. The study also examined the various ways through which girls adapt these taboos and the effects these taboos have on their overall development.

Keywords: Women, Menstruation, Taboo, Impure.

INTRODUCTION

“Do not touch the pickle, do not exercise, do not wear white clothes and do not utter the word ‘period’. These are some of the statements that Indian women hear every month when they experience the menstrual periods”.

Menstruation is still a taboo subject in India. Even today women are considered “impure” during their period, subjected to social, religious and cultural restrictions. These restrictions have excluded women from their daily activities. This exclusion is every month’s exclusion. There is an unspoken “culture of silence” with regard to their menstruation (Jamadar, 2012).

Menstruation is known as the reproductive cycle in which blood from the uterus exits through the vagina. It is a natural process that first occurs in girls usually between the age of 11 & 14 years (menarche) and is one of the indicators of the onset of puberty among them (UNICEF,2008). Menarche and menstruation is an issue that every girl and women have to deal with once she enters adolescence around the average age of 12, until she reaches the menopause somewhere in her 40’s (UNICEF India, 2008). Omidvar and Begum, (2010), argue that, though menstruation is a natural process but still it is regarded as unclean or dirty. It is linked with several misconceptions and practices in Indian society which sometimes results into adverse health outcomes.

Menstrual blood is seen as ‘the greatest of all pollution’, in Bangladesh and menstruating women are not allowed to prepare food or even go near the rice fields. Women’s status is lower than a dog’s in Western Nepal, because she is menstruating. During periods she cannot enter her house or eat anything except boiled

rice (Meggit, 1964). Puri and Kapoor (2006) in their study “Taboos and myths associated with women health among rural and urban adolescent girls in Punjab” argue that, not entering the “puja” room is the major restriction among urban girls whereas not entering the kitchen is the main restriction among the rural girls during menstruation. Further, Dasgupta and Sarkar (2008), in their study “Menstrual hygiene among adolescent girls” argue that, menstruating girls and women are restricted from offering prayers and touching holy books. The underlying basis for this myth is also the cultural belief of impurity associated with menstruation. It is further believed that menstruating women are unhygienic and unclean and hence the foods they prepare or handle get contaminated. In rural areas, adolescent girls consider menstruation as a sin or curse from God.

The present paper is an attempt to study various socio-cultural taboos attached with the process of menstruation among the Dogra women of Jammu region. In order to study and analyse these taboos, a small sample of about 25 Dogra women in the age group of 14-55 years from the village of Jammu area were selected. Random and Purposive sampling technique was used to select the sample. Interview schedule was used to collect the data.

Patil [2011] argued that in some cultures, women burry their cloths used during menstruation to prevent them from being used by evil spirits. Not only in India, but studies depict such taboos from across the world, In Surinam [South America], menstrual blood is believed to be dangerous, and a malevolent person can do harm to menstruating women or girl by using black magic [wisi]. It is also believed that women can use her menstrual blood to impose her will on a man. Interestingly, in Asia including India, such beliefs are still practised.

Leela dube [2001] in her work “Anthropological Exploration in Gender: Intersecting Fields”, argued that in many parts of India, the menstrual cycle was seen as a gift and when a girl would menstruate for the first time, it would be celebrated in public. But this again is problematic view as the menstrual cycle was seen as a boon for the reproduction. Even when people celebrated it, they had a reductionist view that women’s ultimate goal in life is reproduction. The common features of the celebration of the onset of puberty are confinement or seclusion of the girl for a certain period number of days, arti to signify the auspiciousness of the occasion and to ward off the evil, to which a menstruating girl is believed to be especially vulnerable, serving her special food, informing relatives and friends, giving the girl a ritual bath, presenting her with new clothes and accessories of beautification such as flowers, jewellery, and bangles, and a feast which also serves the purpose of announcing the event.

Further, Leela Dube in her work quotes examples from different states of India. In Karnataka, at her first menstruation, a girl is fed dry coconut, milk, ghee, certain fruits, a mixture of jaggery and sesame seeds, and also meat and chicken soups, among meat eating groups. It is customary for the relatives, particularly affinal relatives, to bring gifts.

In Andhra Pradesh, jaggery and sesame seeds are ceremonially pounded by women, often to the accompaniment of songs; small balls made out of this mixture are given to the menstruating girl and are distributed among the other women and girls. There is also an exchange of turmeric powder and kumkum among married women, which is a common feature of most auspicious occasions. Among the vokkaliga of Mysore, the period of confinement lasts for sixteen days, at the end of which there is a celebration. The girl has to be kept back from attending school or going out in this period.

Leela Dube further compares south with northern states and argues that, In contrast to the south, the first menstruation is not marked by public rituals in most of north India. The event is unobtrusively taken care of by the mother and the female relatives and within the home. The observances relating to menstrual pollution are introduced quietly, often with the intention that children and males in the family and outsiders should not notice them. A menstruating girl is asked to not eat spicy food, pickles, and curds, and in general,

to avoid very 'cold' or very 'hot' foods. She is advised not to stand in cold water for too long or walk around with wet feet. Jumping, playing rough games, and riding a bicycle are considered harmful during menstruation. All these are related, as in the south, to the care which needs to be taken of the girl's reproductive organs and of the menstrual period and flow. However, apart from these positive perceptions majority of societal and cultural view of menstrual blood remained negative.

Similarly, Dr Rani Bang [2010] in her book "Putting Women First: Women and Health in Rural Community" argued that women in rural communities have very little knowledge about menstrual health. She argues that the cultural perception such as the colour of the menstrual blood governs their perception what is normal and abnormal. They resist using the sanitary napkin because it is difficult to dispose them of. They fear it might fall into the hands of someone who can use *jadu tona* [Black magic] Esther Harding (1989) describes the mother goddess in India, who is thought to menstruate. At these times, statues of her are hidden and blood stained cloths are displayed. These cloths are then highly valued and used as treatments for numerous illnesses.

The silence around menstruation is so culturally ingrained that despite living in a home without restrictions, there are innumerable examples that silence the women. Extended family firmly objects girls to visit religious places during their period, for fear of hampering the 'purity' of the place. Girls are routinely told to wear black pants to "avoid embarrassment". The silence and shame around the menstrual cycle have caused severe problems for girls. Kounteya Sinha argued that in a survey conducted in 2011, it was revealed that in north India, over 30% of the girls interviewed drop out of school after they start menstruating. Reproductive Tract Infection [RTI] was 70% more common among women who were unable to maintain hygiene during their menstrual cycle. This type of cultural neglect of menstrual hygiene is reflected in policies as well because a large number of adolescent girls [between 12-13 years of age] miss five days of school due to lack of toilets for girls.

Pallavi Thakur (2018) in one of her article "17 illogical taboos about menstruation that still exists in India", talks about the number of illogical taboos that are still associated with menstruation and still being practiced. These are

- A menstruating woman is impure, dirty or cursed.
- A menstruating woman should not enter the temple.
- A menstruating woman should not enter the kitchen.
- Nobody should touch a menstruating woman.
- Celebrated yet out casted.
- Virgins should not use tampons.
- Menstrual blood is magical.
- The power of a menstruating woman [some documents said that menstruating women are so powerful that their offering to God drowns out the offerings of everyone else present in the room].
- 70% of women still use old rags to soak the flow
- Buying sanitary napkins is embarrassing
- Shhh! don't talk about it
- More restrictions [some women are not allowed to water plants or sleep in the bed as their husbands].
- Her touch can rot the pickle
- Isolation is all she experiences [In rural villages many women spend their periods in an animal shed or a separate shed].
- Separate utensils
- Don't get near the Tulsi plant.
- Don't wash your hair

For nearly two centuries, western patriarchal have used the process of menstruation to socially define women and their standing with in the social hierarchy. This solipsistic male world view has historically pinned women's reproductive biology against them as religious, medical, and economic discourses have been exercised to socially subjugate and inscribe the menstrual body with symbolic cultural "text" (Lee 1994:343). These cultural inscriptions mark the female body as a site of reproduction, not only for the material continuity of the human race, but also for the more tangible proliferation of societal norms and values. While both girls and boys are socialized into prescribed gender scripts by the age of five, girls are given special instructions in femininity maintenance at the onset of puberty which stipulates female docility through bodily subordination (West and Zimmerman 1987; lee 1994; Merskin 1999; Kissling 2006).

It is because women menstruate that menstruation is a curse (Kissling 2006). Gloria Steinem made a similar point in her work "if men could; menstruate" (1982), their bleeding bodies would represent a "boast-worthy, masculine event" due to their privileged social standing. The menstrual cycle is constructed negatively due to the structurally embedded, institutionalized nature of the gender dichotomy which devalues and separates the female condition from that of men(Stubbs and costs 2004; MacDonald,2007). This construction socially positions women in dualistic opposition to men, subsequently tabooing and stigmatizing their bleeding bodies in order to legitimate the status of women as subordinate, as *other*. Therefore with this background that how menstruation define social standing of women in the society and illogical taboos, the restrictions attached with the process of menstruation, the knowledge, practices and health seeking behaviour of Dogra women regarding menstrual cycle was looked into.

During the fieldwork it was found that most of the females (between the age group of 30-55 years) in the selected area were unaware about the menstrual process before its occurrence. It was further found that even today the females of Dogra community tend to face a number of taboos related to dietary intake, religious activities, physical activities and hygiene. Most of the females were prohibited from entering into kitchens but all restricted from entering the temples and performing any religious activities. The females were especially taught not to take citrus food, spicy and cold food during their periods. It was also noticed that though mothers had no idea about the menarche during their childhood but they passed information regarding menstrual process and taboos related to it to their daughters and hence the taboos were transferred from one generation to another. Most of the females argued that these taboos were useful and hence never questioned their existence and authenticity.

Nature of taboos

In the field, Dogra women reported that they encounter multiple taboos related to menstruation. All the females faced prohibition related to religious activities such as praying, entering temples, fasting etc. All of them also face restrictions related to dietary intake whereby they were prohibited from taking some specific foods during their monthly menstrual cycle. The Dogra females also faced restrictions related to their physical hygiene. However, these restrictions were followed more by the elder females than the school going girls.

Religious restrictions during menstruation

Results reveal that all the females faced restrictions related to religious activities like praying, entering temples, fasting etc. both the elder females and school going girls pointed the fact that following the religious practices was must for them and they could never imagine not following these restrictions. Some girls pointed that they were allowed to visit the goddess temples only as they believed that goddess herself menstruate so there is no problem in going to goddess temple. All the respondents felt that most of these taboos were accepted and hence never questioned their existence and authenticity.

Dietary restrictions during menstruation

During the field work it was found that all the respondents faced restrictions related to intake of citrus food during menstruation. It was believed that those who take citrus foods will suffer from abdominal cramps. One would also find taboos on the intake of cold food during menstruation because they believed that, when cold food is taken it leads to freezing of menstrual blood leading to many reproductive problems. Very few of them face restrictions related to spicy food intake during menstruation.

Physical restrictions during menstruation

All the females reported that they do not face any restriction on physical activities during menstruation. Those activities which are physically exacting and laborious be it work, play or exercise were avoided for the basic reason that it could lead to heavy menstrual bleeding and leads to physical discomfort and pain.

Restrictions on cooking food during menstruation

Some of the females reported that they were not allowed to enter the kitchen during menstruation and were not allowed to cook food during this time. Some of them also reported that they are allowed to enter the kitchen but they do not serve food to the male members of the house, as it is believed that it would affect their health. They were also not allowed to touch pickle during this time with a belief that their touch would rot the pickle. They do not question these restrictions or taboos, as these were institutionalised.

Restrictions related to physical hygiene

Females face restrictions related to physical hygiene such as taking bath every day, washing hair everyday etc. however, these restrictions were followed more by elder females than the school going girls. Majority of the sample females use cloth as a protective material during menstruation and very few of the girls use sanitary pads because of lack of sanitary pads and poverty only when they go to school otherwise they were routinized to use cloth only.

Medium of information about menstrual taboos/restrictions.

Majority of the females were not aware of menstruation before they started it. For most of them source of information about the menstrual taboos was their mother and in some cases their elder sisters. Some sample females also reported that they do not talk about menstruation to the girl who is not menstruating as it will lead to the early arrival of menstruation or puberty. They also reported that they were not taught about these taboos but they actually learnt these taboos and restriction by simply observing and following it.

Conclusion

Menstruation is a natural process to reproduce, giving essence to a new life and thus human existence has been possible through years by years. In spite of the essential role this physiological process has constructed a culture of silence for the females. In the study it was found that there is low level of knowledge about menstruation and its related issues among the Dogra females. The sample was culturally and socially bounded with traditional practices related to menstruation. These cultural practices were believed and followed without much questioning throughout generations as they find it beneficial for them in term of taking rest, not cooking food, not performing any hectic work and sometimes not going to school. Reuse of old cloth for absorption of menstrual blood was found among majority of the females. The level of personal

hygiene practised by these females was unsatisfactory. One needs to aware them regarding menstruation and its related issues as well as there is a dire need of sanitary pads for their hygiene and healthiness.

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