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Menstruation in Transition: A Narrative Review on Exploring Cultural Beliefs, Stigma, and Sustainability in India

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Abstract: This paper aims to understand menstruation as a developmental milestone through the cultural lens. It tries to look at menstrual experiences within the Indian context and also through global cultural perspectives. Menstrual experiences are diverse and mostly dictated by religious and cultural beliefs in society. It also has strong psychological and sociological implications. These experiences can also build an attitude towards menstruation and bodily autonomy, which can be positive or negative. It is essential to understand and study these aspects to address the cultural taboos or stigmas associated with them. This paper also looks at the urban and rural experiences of women regarding menstruation and access to menstrual products in India. It tries to explore the sustainable menstrual practices by Indian women and the accessibility of the same. It tries to highlight the implications of various stigmatising practices on the mental health of women.

Keywords: *Menstruation, India, cultural beliefs, stigma*

Menarche is the first occurrence of menstrual bleeding in females. Normally, females attain menarche by preteens, however, the onset age may differ from person to person and also from region to region. It is one of the significant developmental milestones in females, indicating the advent of fertility and the reproductive cycle. It is a transitional phase marked by physiological and psychological changes (Ruble & Brooks-Gunn, 1982). This also marks the beginning of puberty. Puberty is experienced by adolescents as a developmental stage when they sexually mature and develop secondary sexual characteristics (Feldman, 2019).

A recent longitudinal study found the median age of menarche at 12.25 years (Biro et al., 2018, p. 343). Genetics may play a role in the onset of menarche. Menarche is associated with a gradual increase in oestrogen levels affecting the HPO axis. This increase in estrogenic activity creates physical changes that help the body in reproduction. This may

include the widening of the pelvis and hips and an increase in body fat deposition, particularly in the hips and thighs (Muehlenbein, 2015, pp. 1–3).

The growth spurt, as part of puberty, leads to some bodily changes that may not be comfortable for the girls. It may lead to body shaming and self-objectification due to messages received via media and peers (Stubbs, 2008, p. 65). Lack of education and mentoring for young girls creates a stigma in their minds towards body changes (Plesons et al., 2021). They feel ashamed and embarrassed about the changes, like hair growth in parts of the body and the development of breasts (*Concerns Girls Have About Puberty*, 2015). They also fear being perceived differently by their family members, which adds to the anxiety. This stage is marked by adolescent girls trying to hide their growth by wearing loose clothes and avoiding social gatherings (*Concerns Girls Have About Puberty*, 2015). There is also a stigma attached to menstruation, which causes them to hide their periods from their father and male siblings. It is not considered a topic to be discussed outside of female family members (Rawat et al., 2015, p. 7).

Experiences of Menarche:

Menarche is perceived as the milestone of a young girl's life where she enters womanhood. In Indian culture, it is primarily celebrated as it is seen as a celebration of the girl's fertility. It is considered proof of her having grown up and is ready for marriage. Within some cultures of western and southern India, the family may hold a pooja (prayer meet) and a feast to celebrate this milestone. The girl may be secluded from the household and not allowed to interact with family members. On the final day of menstruation, the girl may be given a ritualistic purification bath. This is usually followed by a feast for the family and community. The girl is gifted new clothes, jewellery and other female accessories to mark this celebration. This celebration may also act as an occasion for announcing to the community about the marriageable daughter in the family. (Dharmalingam, 1994, p. 40) This is sometimes called the 'half saree function' or Ritushuddhi or Saddangu in Tamil Nadu, and Tuloni Biyah in Assamese culture (Patnaik, 2023).

Geographical characteristics of the region, the food culture and traditional medicines have also dictated the menarche practices. The young girl is secluded from others and given nutritious, easy-to-digest food (Joseph, 2020). In Karnataka, girls are provided with sweets made from a mix of dry fruits like dates, almonds, raisins, and cashews, along with clarified butter and the resin of babul (Acacia). In Andhra Pradesh, girls are given dry coconut, ghee, and khichdi made with moong dal, milk, sesame laddus, jaggery, and ample water (Joseph, 2020). Girls are also given raw milk with amaranth seeds on the first day of their periods. They are also given savoury and sweet dishes made of ragi (finger

millet) and rice flour. Most traditional food preparations during the seclusion period are vegetarian (Eclectic Aparna, 2018).

Experience and reaction to menarche also depend on the awareness or knowledge of the bodily process. If the girl is not prepared or educated about menstruation, she is likely to experience confusion, discomfort and fear regarding it. In a study conducted on girls from a rural area of Ambajogi, India, 44.8% of the female participants reported feeling scared at the onset of menarche (Deo & Ghattargi, 2005). The way a girl learns about menstruation and the changes that come with it can significantly affect her response to menarche. In India, discussing menstruation has historically been taboo, and even today, cultural and social influences continue to pose challenges to improving knowledge and awareness on the subject (Rawat et al., 2015).

Seclusionary Practices:

Apart from this celebration, there is sometimes also an unspoken stigma. Within Indian culture, seclusion practices during menstruation are followed. This ideally should act as a time for rest for the menstruating girl. However, sometimes these practices can be extreme, which may cause young girls to dread their periods. Sometimes girls are not allowed to worship, enter places of worship or touch certain kinds of foods while on their periods (Kumar & Srivastava, 2011). These restrictions can make them feel ashamed and sometimes stigmatised about their own natural bodily processes. Some communities perceive menstruation as dirty, and seclusion is considered important to keep the unclean girl away from other family members. She is allowed only after the end of menstruation and the purification bath (Soumya & Sequira, 2016, p. 11).

However, traditionally, not all communities believed in myths and taboos about menstruation. The Lingayat community from Northern Karnataka, also called Veershaivas, had an egalitarian attitude since the 12th century. They believed in the autonomy of women and did not restrict women during menstruation. The Lingayat women are allowed to do their routine activities and participate in religious rituals after a customary bath during their menstruation. Menstruation is not considered to be unclean (Pillai, 2017). A similar belief is practised by the Sikhs in India. Guru Granth Sahib rejects sexism and restrictions surrounding menstruating women. Sikh women are allowed to pray during menstruation and also attend Gurudwaras and religious rituals. (Bhartiya, 2013)

In West Guwahati, state of Assam, there is a temple of Goddess Kamakya Devi, the menstruating goddess. The temple celebrates the fertility festival annually called the Ambuwasi Puja. This festival marks the yearly menstruation of the goddess, and the

temple is shut for three days during this time. The temple is supposedly situated at one of the shakti peethas which represents the yoni (the vagina) of the goddess. There is also a Kamakhya Devi temple in the state of Andhra Pradesh (Shin, 2010).

In Nepal, some communities practice Chaupadi, which is a traditional seclusion practice observed during menstruation. Practising Chaupadi has led to many reproductive problems for women. Chaupadi, also called menstrual exile, is when women are expected to live far away from the community, typically in livestock sheds. They are prevented from touching other people or their belongings. Many times, these sheds are unhygienic and unsafe. As women are not allowed to touch food, water and other resources during menstruation, they are sometimes unable to get these necessities during menstruation. This practice comes from the belief that menstruation is dirty and sinful. Although this practice was banned in 2005 by the Nepal Supreme Court, it is still observed in far communities of Nepal (United Nations, 2011). Similar seclusion practices are seen in India. In the remote Himalayan region of India, a study survey was conducted in the Pindar Valley in which it was reported that menstruating females were made to stay in the cattle shed as part of the seclusion practice and use cow urine for purification. When young girls achieved menarche, they were separated from family and made to stay in the cattle shed for ten days and thereafter for three days during their monthly menstruation (Joshy et al, 2019).

There are also a lot of myths surrounding food and menstruation. It is typically believed that a menstruating woman can spoil food by touching it. In India, menstruating women are not allowed to touch ground spices or pickles (Kumar & Srivastava, 2011). A study on 1522 adolescent girls from South India reported that 69.3% of them had restricted intake of certain food items such as non-vegetarian food, milk and milk products, sweets, prasadam, and vegetables during menstruation (Varghese et al., 2015). Studies conducted in West Bengal, India, found that most families practised restricted diets wherein the menstruating women abstained from eating sour foods like tamarind, pickles, raw mangoes or curds (Sarkar et al., 2017). In a study conducted on 117 adolescent girls and 41 mothers across communities in Ranchi, India, some of the mothers reported that during menstruation, the body emits some specific smell or rays. They believed that these rays could spoil food. Therefore, it is important to keep certain foods away from menstruating women (Kumar & Srivastava, 2011). During menstruation, girls are often restricted from entering the kitchen or any room which stores foodgrains. Dairy items like milk, curd, and clarified butter are also kept away from the touch of a menstruating woman. Families practising seclusion often make the menstruating family members eat from separate utensils (Kaundal & Thakur, 2014).

Menstrual Practices in Rural and Urban India:

A study on the experiences and awareness of menstruation among young girls of rural East Delhi revealed that around 92% of the participants were restricted from worshipping, 70% were restricted from household activities, and 56% avoided certain types of foods during menstruation. Out of these participants, 74.8% used homemade sanitary products during menstruation (Nair et al., 2007). Although there is a perspective change in urban cities of India, women in rural India still hold traditional beliefs regarding menstruation, thereby restricting even their young daughters. As menstruation is considered dirty and impure, many women restrict themselves from household activities that may be considered holy, like cooking for the family (Kaundal & Thakur, 2014). Among rural Indian women, too, it has been observed that there is a strong belief regarding menstruation and black magic (Kumar & Srivastava, 2011). Used menstrual products like menstrual cloths are considered a potent tool which can be misused by others for black magic and bringing harm to the family. Some also report not using the menstrual cloths/rags again as one usage renders them dirty, and they would dispose of them by burying them (Singh, 2006). Many young girls may be aware of the ready-made sanitary products available. However, most shy away from buying them due to financial constraints and the embarrassment of asking for such products from male shopkeepers. This detains them from availing of necessary products, thereby reducing their access (Kothari, 2010). Traditionally, Indian women have used cotton cloths/rags during menstruation, which may be considered a sustainable practice. However, due to the stigma attached to menstrual blood, they shy away from washing and drying these rags in open spaces. Instead, they are kept in dark, closed spaces, which may lead to other sanitation issues (Pednekar et al., 2022).

Access to menstrual products is comparatively better in urban metro cities of India, however, they largely depend on the socio-economic background of the women. Lack of access to proper toilet facilities and menstrual products makes it difficult for young girls and women to practice safe and healthy menstrual hygiene behaviours. Lack of accessibility can lead to experiences of reproductive diseases, which otherwise can be avoided. This is especially found true in the slums of urban cities (Rajagopal & Mathur, 2017). The current trend in using menstrual products is moving towards sustainable sanitary products like Menstrual cups, cotton pads and reusable pads. This is observed among educated, working women and young girls in urban cities. This shift in the usage of menstrual products is largely for environmental consciousness and comfort. Many women have reportedly felt relieved by using menstrual cups and have cited the economic benefits of the same. Many Indian entrepreneurs like Ms Prachi Kaushik have been part of the Green Menstruation Movement. She started an enterprise called

Vyomini, which trains women in rural India to make their own sustainable sanitary pads (Diwan, 2024). Social enterprise Aakar makes 100% compostable and biodegradable sanitary napkins (World Bank Group, 2021). Other homegrown brands are selling menstrual cups and cloth pads. TruCup is one such initiative by two Indian women (Global Press Journal, 2020).

A meta-analysis of the usage of sustainable menstrual products done by The Lancet has found that using menstrual cups reduces the waste created by single-use sanitary pads and is also more financially profitable (van Eijk et al., 2019). However, these advantages are overshadowed by the concerns of accessibility to clean toilets, water and sterilisation. Sustainable products like cloth pads and cups need water for washing and reusing. It is recommended that the menstrual cups be sterilised in hot water before use (Wunsch et al., 2022). Unfortunately, not all women have access to these resources. Women are generally the ones entrusted with the work of collecting and storing water. Lack of this resource significantly affects their ability and access to sanitation (Pednekar et al., 2022). Due to the intrusive nature of the menstrual cup, many women also have concerns about breaking their hymen in the process of inserting the cup, although this is not possible (Bajaj, 2022). Menstrual Hygiene Educators may play a significant role in bridging the gap in knowledge about these products and busting myths concerning them.

However, activists like Ms Sinu Joseph, who is a Menstrual Hygiene Educator, have pointed out in many of her educational videos that Indian women have been using sustainable menstrual products for a long time, even before this became a market trend. During their work in rural Karnataka, they came across women who did not use any sanitary products. They used a particular type of dressing which allowed them to free-bleed into a cloth. This was washed and reused. These women had not been exposed to the concept of sustainable menstrual products, but their natural wisdom and practices were already sustainable and environmentally friendly. Rather, it is believed that these women are healthier and more attuned to their bodily needs (Joseph, 2016).

The menstrual experiences of women across communities in India are varied. The nature of these experiences is dictated by religion, caste, class and geographic location. Communities are practising seclusion practices even today, and some have shed these archaic practices. The negative social experiences of menarche can be mitigated with appropriate education related to reproductive health (Pednekar et al., 2022). A review of studies on Menarche has revealed that it is recommended to provide puberty education to both girls and boys. It is pertinent to emphasise the importance of maintaining proper hygiene during menstruation, ensuring access to clean and functional toilets in schools and communities, and offering emotional support at the family and community levels.

They believe that comprehensive menstrual education and access to necessary facilities will boost self-confidence and promote personal development among adolescent girls (Chandra-Mouli & Patel, 2017). Studies have also shown that menstrual education plays a crucial role in empowering young girls. (Pednekar et al., 2022). India is still progressing on its path from a culture of shame and stigma surrounding menstruation to embracing a more positive and healthy attitude towards it. Menstrual health educators, working in both rural and urban areas, are at the forefront of driving this transition.

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