



STIGMATIZED MENSTRUATION IN THE ERA OF MODERNITY: A SOCIOLOGICAL INQUIRY

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Abstract

This paper argued that women experience social stigma as a result of menstruation even in the 21st century. Any stain or blemish that makes a person's body or character flawed is referred to as a stigma. This stigma is spread by popular culture's potent socialisation agents, such as ads and educational materials. This study considers cultural beliefs and practices related to menstruation. Researchers show that the stigmatised status of menstruation has significant negative effects on girls' and women's health, sexuality, and overall wellbeing in our evaluation. The shame associated with menstruation, according to this essay, both reflects and contributes to women's inferior standing in society. This piece investigates several myths and misconceptions that are part of Himachal Pradesh's culture. Apart from this study throw some light on various practices, rituals associated with the above mentioned, very crucial phases of the women's life. It seeks to learn about the existing social and cultural traditions around menstruation, as well as the behavioural changes that female have to face after scenario in Himachal Pradesh. The current paper is a summary of information accessible on menstruation taboos and numerous activities associated with them. It looks into the nature and content of the cultural attitudes that exist now regarding gender relations. The study is based on a qualitative research.

Keywords: Social stigma, menstruation, women, modernity, social exclusion

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Introduction

Menstruation has always remained a topic that is frowned upon. Menstruation is a natural phenomenon that is associated with reproduction, sexuality, creativity, and inner life. Menstruation is derived from the Latin word for months. The term menstruation comes from the old French word menstrual, which meaning monthly or occurring on a monthly basis. The menstrual cycle is a difficult and censorious time in the lives of women. So, this study has been conducted to examines the nature and content of contemporary cultural beliefs about gender relations during menstruation. It will also highlight the increasingly contentious debates about the relationship between religion (religiosity) and gender (Hopkins, 2009; Seguino, 2011; Moghadam, 1991; Chaudhuri, 2013). In Indian society the process of menstruation in women faces certain myths. It has always been associated with impurity and pollution. The way in which menstruation women are treated is influenced by these factors and convictions. The term "pollution" refers to something that is contaminated and impure. The idea of filth and impurity as a "rejected element of ordered system" is discussed by Mary Douglas in her book Purity and Danger (Douglas, 1966). Menstruating women are one of the forbidden elements according to the methodical system of India. Researcher's aim in this paper is to address some of the practices and restriction on women during the menstruation period in a specific area of Himachal Pradesh. This study will explore diverse social- cultural beliefs and practices influencing menstruation practice that is affecting the of society. The researcher belongs to Himachal Pradesh, for this study questioner method, observation technique and telephonic interview with men and women of age group 20-30 have been considered. Taking into consideration the problems associated with the mensuration have been described here. Menstruation is a normal bodily process, but historically it has been viewed as "an unpleasant event which should be hidden and not discussed" (Bailey, 1993). This idea of treating menstruation as a quiet affair has taken the form of an embarrassment which the females usually experience upon discussing the issue out in the open. The source of humiliation in this procedure appears to be the female body and not merely the expelled blood. The emotion of embarrassment is a product of various actions adopted in the society which sees menstruation women as contaminants. During her period, a woman is subjected to a number of customs that serve as limitations on the activities she normally engages in. Starting in the home and moving out into the larger community, these limitations have their place. So, this study

was conducted to evaluate the behaviours of menstruation in adult girls and boys, to ascertain its associated issues, and to ascertain sociocultural attitudes.

Background Global Perspective

In advance of March 8th being International Women's Day, independent human rights experts stated that persistently detrimental socio-cultural norms, stigma, myths, and taboos surrounding menstruation continue to cause women and girls to be excluded from society and subjected to discrimination. In mid-western and far western Nepal, a Hindu ritual known as "chaupadi pratha" prevents menstruation girls and women from living in their own homes and completing everyday duties since they are deemed impure. Women in their reproductive cycle, from menarche to menopause, are the direct victims of this horrific practise, in which Menstruating girls are required to live in the appalling conditions of the "chhaupadi goth" menstrual hut. Although Nepal's highest court pronounced this practise illegal in 2005, it is nonetheless common and done in many parts of the country. It is believed in Tanzania that if a menstruation cloth is seen by anyone other than the female, she would be cursed. Some Hindu Indo-Fijians forbid menstruating women from bathing or leaving the house after 6 o'clock; instead, they must bring in their outdoor-hung reusable towels to avoid the harmful effects of evil spirits. According to reports, women in Bangladesh bury their absorbents to avoid them from being utilised by evil spirits and are forbidden from touching food or cooking.

In some countries menstruating women are still sometimes prevented from participating in activities like touching water or cooking, attending religious and cultural rites, or other community events because they are still seen as dirty and unclean. Also, several nations associate the onset of menstruation with readiness for marriage, raising the dangers of adolescent pregnancy and reducing options for girls to pursue careers and education.

In advance of International Women's Day, a group of human rights experts from the UN urge on the world to eliminate the taboo around menstruation health and take decisive action to stop discriminatory practises and protect women's and girls' menstrual health. Menstruation-related discrimination has been outlawed in several nations, but there is still much to be done to guarantee that the rules are really followed. Additionally, several nations have created policies that are sensitive to the needs of women and girls during menstruation, including measures to help

women at work (Such paid leave) and the free distribution of feminine hygiene items in schools. But politicians continue to mostly ignore the human rights issues raised by women's menstrual cycles around the globe. Failing to meet women's and girls' menstruation and health needs has a negative influence on all facets of their lives and infringes their fundamental rights to equality as well as the ability to take actively in public, economic, social, and cultural life. Because of the idea in impurity connected with menstruation women, religions all over the world place restrictions and inhibitions on women during their periods. Although most developed countries have a supportive cultural environment for discussing menstrual health and hygiene, it is difficult to engage young girls and women in discussions about menstruation in developing countries, particularly in rural areas, due to gender bias, social stigma, taboos, and myths.

Indian Point of View

In today's Indian society, there are numerous myths and misunderstandings about menstruation. In the past, merely mentioning the issue was frowned upon in India, and cultural and social pressures continue to be a barrier to furthering understanding on the subject even now. Menstruation is still regarded as filthy and impure in many parts of India. The existing Indian cultural context is intertwined with a series of customs, myths, and misconceptions, particularly about menstruation and related difficulties. This myth's origins can be traced back to Vedic times. Furthermore, in the Hindu faith, women are forbidden from engaging in typical everyday activities when menstruating. She must be purified before she can return to her family and daily requirements. Yet, it is scientifically established that the true reason of menstruation is ovulation followed by a missed opportunity of conception, which results in bleeding from the endometrial vessels and is followed by cycle preparation. As a result, there appears to be no justification for the concept that menstruation women are impure to remain. In India During menstruation, the main restriction for urban girls is not entering the puja room, The primary constraint for rural girls is not going to the kitchen. According to (Kumar and Srivastava's) research. Menstruating women are unsanitary and dirty, and the food they prepare may become contaminated as a result. Traditional connections with bad spirits, remorse, and embarrassment surrounding sexual reproduction frequently exacerbate menstrual cultural standards and religious taboos. In various places of India, Hinduism is associated with concepts of cleanliness and pollution. During the

physical processes of menstruation and childbirth, all women, regardless of social caste, race, pollute the environment. Water is frequently recognised as the most widely used purifying medium. Water source preservation against pollution, which is the physical manifestation of Hindu deities, is thus a critical concern. This explains why menstruation women are not permitted to bath, particularly during the first several days of their monthly period. Girls are forced to associate their own bodies with curses and impurity because if a girl or woman touches a cow while she is on her period, the animal would become sterile.

Himachal Perspective

Women in their reproductive cycle, from menarche to menopause, are the direct victims of this horrific practise, in which menstrual girls are compelled to stay in deplorable living conditions. The sad reality of the society is that women do not enjoy same respect and status as males. Women's problems are not confined to social rights; they also exist in the workplace and at home. Due to the myths and superstitions held by families and other member of the community, the menstrual cycle is dangerously disregarded and given little attention. In rural areas, women continue to engage in rituals that are hazardous to their personal hygiene and health. (Sanjana, Kaushik, July 8, 2017). Menstruation-related cultural norms and religious taboos are frequently exacerbated by historical links with bad spirits and humiliation. In addition, the Hindu religion forbids women from going about their regular lives while menstruating. For three days, women are not authorised to perform Puja and are not permitted to enter the kitchen. Menstruating women are also thought to be filthy and dirty, which can contaminate the food they touch or prepare. Pickles, curd, tamarind, and other sour foods are strictly prohibited. Apr-Jun 2015 (Garg S, Anand T)

Review of existing literature threw some light on the scope of the current research paper. There are very less sociological studies that mention the stigmatized menstruation in modern era. In this context the present article tries to place this research gap for further in-depth investigation from the life experience of women. The paper has placed the research questions such as, what is the relation of gender roles and religious belief system existing in Himachal Pradesh, how do the taboos and religion influence the menstrual status of women, how do the women are detached from the society during their menstrual cycle and why do the menstruation place as a stigmatized social condition.

Methodology

The methodology of the study consists of face-to-face interview of women and men. The data collected was qualitative in nature. The target group was men and women of the age group 20-30 years living in Tehsil Rohru of district Shimla, Himachal Pradesh.

Relation between Gender roles and religious belief

Women's social status varies greatly over the world. Religion is one of many essential characteristics linked with the differentiation of gender inequality, and it must be viewed as a fluid term with interpretations and practises that are surrounded and hence fluctuate with respect to cultural and historical relations. Gender inequality is one of the most widespread types of social inequality, and it exists all across the world, with varied repercussions in different places. These changes are primarily the result of cultural legacies, historical development, geographic location, and, last but not least, societal religious norms (Inglehart and Norris, 2003). Despite the complexity of the situation, some religious customs and traditions may help promote gender inequalities and devalue women's roles in society. Religious organisations' cultural and structural frameworks, as well as how religious texts are interpreted, all have an impact on how women are perceived in society (Klingorová, 2015).

Every religion promotes slightly different standards, establishes distinct organisations, and relies on distinct cultural and historical reinforcements. The impact of individual global religions on the status of women varies greatly (Klingorová, 2013, 2015).

A woman respondent opined, *"When she was a member of a mixed family and lived in the village, she observed the taboo of not cooking during menstruation. She did not have any support structure now that she had moved to town and was living in a nuclear family, therefore she could not avoid cooking. Her religious system remained conventional, but her new circumstances made it impossible to practise."*

This opinion demonstrates how practises can change without necessarily resulting in a change in beliefs. This reflects how deeply these taboos run and how difficult it is to overcome them. In the context of gender, we inquired, "Would menstruation be addressed differently if it were a masculine phenomenon?" Clearly not. We were all of the opinion that if males had periods, it would be viewed as a source of immense suffering and

misery. There would be a lot of academic and scientific interest in the subject. It would most likely be celebrated culturally as a sign of fertility. Instead of shame and quiet, it would be discussed in books and magazines, shown in art and sculpture, and recognised as a major medical, social, and human concern.

Religion and the taboos around Menstruation

Menstruation is an important but sometimes overlooked component of a woman's health. The beliefs and taboos linked with it may be the source of this negligence. Menstruation control is critical for female reproductive and general health. Contrarily, many cultures and geographical regions view menstruation as taboo. Menstruation is related with shame, anxiety, and suffering. Several unsanitary activities have resulted from menstrual taboos, beliefs, and inhibitions. It is harmful to reproductive health in particular, and consequently to overall health. Menstruation begins when a woman enters the reproductive age, but due to prevalent cultural and religious norms, this shift can be frightening and challenging (Dhingra et al., 2009). Many girls/women have minimal knowledge and misconceptions regarding the physiological changes that occur during menarche. The majority of this information comes from their mothers, friends, and teachers. This knowledge has an impact on girls' emotional well-being, mental health, lifestyle, and, most importantly, health.

One female respondent, stated;

"I recall a session led by female school workers. Only girls were present, and they were informed about menstruation. They gave us each a pad at the end of the lesson. You know, it was really tough for us to bring it back to class because we could not let anyone see it. The boys continuously asked us, "What are you hiding?" We all remained silent and glanced at the floor. I was very embarrassed."

This self-reflection of respondent shows, how menstruation is not just a biological process, but it is a taboo in educational institutions.

On the other hand, the male respondent showed totally different opinion. The male respondent is a graduate and an entrepreneur he says;

"In my family females during menstruation are not allowed in the kitchen and pooja room for 8 days. My father and myself do not touch the food made by a menstruating woman from my family. My mother during her periods is prohibited to enter the kitchen and pooja room for a week. We are strongly following religious practices. We do pooja twice in a day. That is the reason for prohibiting women

from worshipping God and restricting others for not taking food from them.”

As the society is technologically advanced, the perception of people on non-material things such as religious belief system can be seen as present in a more vulnerable manner. The male respondent is highly educated but he still follows these social practices which is creating discrimination on opposite gender of the society. From his opinion, it is clear that he follows social stigma related to menstruation which is lagging behind the non-material culture.

Social Exclusion

The sad reality is that women do not enjoy the same respect and status as males. Problem faced by women are not just limited to social rights, the problem is common in workplace and home also. Due to the myths and superstitions held by families and other members of the community, the menstrual cycle, which is an essential aspect of a woman's life, is dangerously disregarded and given little attention. Women continue to practise rituals that are harmful to their personal hygiene and health in rural places (Kaushik Sanjana, 2017). Religious and cultural taboos around menstruation are usually made worse by historical associations with demons and humiliation. The Hindu religion forbids women from going about their daily lives when they are menstruation. She must first be purified before re-joining her family and resume her daily responsibilities. Women are not allowed to do Puja, even they are restricted from entering kitchen for 3 days.

During the interview one female respondent said, *“The religious function held for the first time in my village. I specially went back to my village for this event. But unfortunately, on the same day I got my periods. So, I was locked in a small room. No one else was allowed to enter that room. I use to get food on the door, for three days. I was not able to watch a single part of the function because of the taboo.”*

Furthermore, it is thought that because menstruation women are filthy and unsanitary, the food they handle or prepare can get tainted. They are forbidden to consume pickles, curd, tamarind, and other sour foods (Garg S, Anand T, 2015). Women are unable to communicate their mental and physical anguish since menstruation is taboo. Researchers have observed that this practise causes issues for women. During menstruation women in very low temperature have to sleep in a specific room where no one else is allowed to enter. She

gets food on the door as she is prohibited for her to go out of that room. Numerous restrictions have been attached with the house chore activities as not to enter the kitchen for three days. Men do not eat food which is even touched or made by them during menstruation. Even after having high literacy rate of 82.8%, according to the 2011 Census still the traditionally practices are suppressing the education. The present study tries to evaluate the relation between religious belief and gender roles, to understand the belief system on menstrual taboo among the youth, to compare the insight of young men and women on menstrual stigma and analyse the impact of detachment on women during menstruation.

Stigmatized condition of menstruation

In their study, scholars suggested that menstrual blood is a stigmatising mark that matches all three of Goffman's categories (Rozin et al, 1987). Menstruation rituals and hygiene practises imply that menstruation blood is shamed unlike other bodily fluids. Some people assert that menstrual blood is more hated or loathed than other bodily fluids like breastmilk and sperm (Bramwell 2001). Some cultures consider women to be filthy during their periods, and therefore need them to take a bath to cleanse themselves before they are allowed to touch a male or go near the kitchen.

From an interview woman respondent conveyed; *“Even if it is minus degree temperature outside, I have to take bath and wash all the clothes that I have used for three days. Even if there is no electricity my mother washes it with cold water. My mother does not allow me to roam here and there in the house, I can only use one bed.”*

Menstrual blood also signifies a woman's identity because it is exclusively a phenomenon experienced by girls and women. Parents and others begin treating females differently once they reach menarche (Lee and Sasser- Coen 1996). Girls who have attained menarche are offered sexuality guidance, informed that they are now adults, and instructed to behave in a manner that restricts the level of freedom they previously enjoyed. Menstruation thus distinguishes women and girls from the dominant and privileged masculine body. Additionally, menstrual blood symbolises a number of essential elements of a stigmatised illness. For instance, it has been described as hazardous because it is both magical and poisonous (Golub 1992). Before the physiology of the menstrual cycle was understood, people were baffled as to how healthy women could bleed for five days without experiencing severe weakness or

death. As a result, menstruation may have appeared mystical. Men did not go through menses thus they must have been terrified of it. They may have been concerned that close contact with menstrual blood could harm them physically or taint them due to its association with the mysterious feminine body as a result, menstruation might have looked poisoned. It is a general phrase for the prejudice experienced by those who menstruate. For people who have wombs, menstruation occurs on average every month for nearly 40 years, and the stigma associated with it serves no constructive purpose. Girls' adolescence has been acknowledged as a unique stage of development. Menarche begins during this time period. It is connected to a number of beliefs and behaviours, which occasionally has a negative impact on one's health. At some time during her reproductive years, every woman experiences her menstrual cycle. Although this is a result of women's efforts to hide it, we suggest that menstruation is more of a hidden than a visible shame (Oxley 1998). Menstrual hygiene materials (e.g., tampons, pads) are designed to absorb fluid and smells, to be invisible through one's clothes, to be small enough to carry quietly in one's pocketbook and to be thrown in a bathroom container discreetly (Kissling 2006). Unless a woman states she is menstruating...or unless menstrual blood leaks through her attire, exposing her stigmatised illness...it is usually impossible to discern if she is menstruating. It is a physiological reaction. Menarche begins during this time period. Premenstrual syndrome is one of many mental and physical morbidities connected to the menstrual cycle. If proper hygiene is not practised when menstruating, it can also put women at risk for RTIs, which can be fatal. Girls who are menstruating are compelled to live alone. They are unable to perform some commonplace tasks. Adolescent girls are typically advised on proper menstrual hygiene practises by their mothers, older sisters, or other family members. Hence, mother's knowledge and opinions about teenage girls' menstrual hygiene, as well as those of other female family members, are crucial factors. Every woman has her menstrual cycle at some point during her reproductive years. It is a physiological process. At this time. Adolescents are forced to deal with a variety of health issues and complications due to a lack of adequate information. An adolescent girl's physical and psychological development is greatly impacted by menarche. When they reach menarche, the majority of girls are uninformed of the proper menstrual hygiene routines. Many adolescents a girl's experience anxiety because they are unprepared before the onset of menarche. India prohibits public discussion of all of these topics.

Conclusion

This study presents a sociological explanation of how menstruation can play a vital role in a society's way of life. It comes to life socially and in the cultural domain through rituals during menarche, taboos and limits throughout one's menstrual life, and the gendered meanings that are built as a result of adhering to such taboos. Menstruation occurs every 28 days throughout roughly two-thirds of a woman's life. Despite the fact that menstruation is a habit for women and a prerequisite for conception, it is stigmatised as evil and impious in many communities and geographical places. As a result, it is critical to establish the extent of awareness, the nature of beliefs, and the sets of taboos in order to identify the elements that may negatively affect menstrual hygiene. Finally, menstruation stigma is reinforced indirectly through silence. Menstruation is frequently avoided in discussion (Kissling 1996), except in specific situations, such as in private with female friends and family, at a health education or biology class, or in a doctor's office. This study sheds light on how the restrictions, taboos, and old age myths associated with menarche are still prevalent in society, and there is an urgent need for women and girls to be educated about the menstruation process, which would be the first step towards better individual and community health. Knowledge of healthy menstruation practises is critical, and it is essentially required for women to be informed in this regard. It is not only the job of the government to create awareness, but also of the individuals in society to facilitate reproductive health education for this society's emerging adults. Raising awareness from childhood will thus aid in the promotion of hygiene.

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