

CULTURAL TABOOS AND RELIGIOUS RESTRICTIONS RELATED TO MENSTRUATION: A REVIEW

Priyanka Pahwa,

Research Scholar,

Department of sociology and Social Work,

H. N. B. G. University, Srinagar (Uttarakhand)

INTRODUCTION

Menstruation can be easily understood as the monthly bleeding of non-pregnant women of childbearing age (**Chawla, 1992**). Though It is just a normal, natural, physiological process happens with every girl after a certain age yet throughout much of its history, menstrual bleeding viewed as a supernatural event (**Whelan, 1975**). And even today many societies consider menstrual blood dangerous, and various religious, domestic and sexual taboos have been established to ward off its mystical powers (**kaundal, 2014**).

The term Taboo is derived from Polynesian word 'Tapu', meaning 'ban or prohibition'. It can be understood as prohibiting any specific community, caste or sex to perform certain activity which is otherwise allowed to others based on moral judgement and sometimes even religious beliefs. Hence breaking the taboo is usually considered objectionable by the society (**kaundal, 2014**).

Menstrual Taboo is one such prevalent social taboo widespread among different societies. Without the proper scientific understanding of the underlying biological basis in earlier times, It is no wonder that primitive religious societies incorporated taboos around the whole menstrual process (**Kaundal, 2014**). As the menstrual cycle matches that of the moon, It appears mysterious or aptly supernatural (**Montgomery, 1974**). In early western cultures, menstruation was believed to

make a woman periodically dangerous and various social restrictions were created to lessen her contact with her husband and with the members of the community as well (**Whelan, 1975**). In other account from the primitive societies such as the Arapesh of New Guinea, newly menstruating girl is isolated from the community in a cave, cage or hole in the earth, dark hut symbolizing womb (**Kaundal, 2014**). The orthodox Jewish regulates the marital relationship between the couple while the woman is menstruating, they call it *niddah*- literally a separation which indicates woman as "unclean" and therefore she cannot have sexual relationship or any other contact with her husband while menstruation (**Goldin, 1941**). The present study is an attempt to provoke the need of increased research on the prevailing taboos related to menstruation and by exploring the attitudes of society toward this monthly event.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

In the existing different religious societies in India, there are number of traditional beliefs, intermingled with various myths and misconceptions especially about menstruation and related issues. Menstruation is generally considered unclean in Indian society. Isolation of the menstruating women and restrictions imposed on menstruating women have reinforced negative attitude towards this phenomena (**Kaundal 2014**). Various religious beliefs and practices followed even today indirectly helps

the topic to be remained bury under layers. Different areas of have had the notion of menstruating goddess. In Punjab It is believed that 'Dharti Maa' 'slept' for a week each month (**Bhattacharya, 1977**). In Kamakhya temple of Assam even today the rituals are performed as if the goddess is menstruating (**Chawla, 1992**).

Hinduism views menstruating women as impure and unclean (**Chawla, 1992**). Earlier and in some parts even today, Hindu women used to leave the main house during her menstruation days and live in a small hut outside the village. They were not even allowed to comb her hair or bathe (**Marglin, 1994**). Some recent studies witness the prohibitions to cook food, enters the kitchen provisions for separate utensils (**Joshi, 2001**). Touching Idols or few food restrictions like not touching pickle to save it from rotting are another examples of taboos prevalent in hinduism (**George, 2012**). A woman while menstruating cannot be a part of any religious activity for the first 4 days of the cycle (**Sharma et,al , 2005**). Other studies also accounted the restriction on mounting horse while menstruating or an elephant or drive a vehicle (**David, 1972**). There is a strong taboo in hinduism for menstruating women to be made known in public sphere (**Marglin 1994**).

In Christianity, The history of menstrual taboos has been a major reason to keep women away from positions of authority (**Whelan, 1975**). Even a gaze of Menstruating women thought to affect the weather negatively (**Ruether, 1990**). Some orthodox church advice women not to receive communion, perform prayers and fasting during menstruation (**Morrow, 2002**).

In muslim culture, It is advocated that menstruating women should be avoided by men and should not be approach till they are 'pure' (**Seklani, 1967**). The regulation placed on menstruating women are derived from koranic law (**Whelan, 1975**).

The question thee (O Muhammad) concerning menstruation. Say it is an illness so let women alone at such times and go not into them till they are cleansed. And when they have purified

themselves, then go in unto them as Allah hath enjoined upon you. (**Koran 2:222**)

Two main restrictions imposed on muslim women while menstruating. First she is not allowed to enter any shrine or mosque. She may not fast even during Ramdan, or touch the quran or recite its contents. And Secondaly, she is forbidden to sexual relationships for seven days after the flow begins (**Westermarck, 1926**).

In Buddhism, even though menstruation is generally viewed as a natural physiological process that women have to go through their childbearing age but over the period of time and under the influence of other religions some Buddhists followers are under the opinion that menstruating women cannot meditate or can't take part in Buddhist ceremonies (**Furth, 1992**). It is also one of the belief in buddhist community that because ghosts eats blood and therefore menstruating women is more vulnerable to attract ghosts and therefore they should be treated a threat to everyone (**Lhamo, 2003**).

DISCUSSION

The similarities among various religions proved the existing taboos being practiced worldwide some of the most striking and common themes can be developed such as isolation of menstruating women, restraining them from making any physical contact with her husband, posing several food restriction to them. Several recent studies even reported the restrictions imposed upon menstruating women such as taking bath, changing clothes, combing hair, cooking food, touching pickle, entering holy places, performing ritual rites (**Singh, 2006**) (**Paul, 2007**). Women in some tribes have to live in a cowshed during menstrual days (**George, 2012**).

The substantial lacunae in providing the knowledge about menstruation may leads to various serious health conditions (**Dhingra et.al, 2009**). There are studies reported infections caused by using dirty rags (**George, 2012**). Poor personal hygiene and unsafe sanitary conditions result in the

girls facing gynaecological problems (**Bhatia, 1995**). Even at present 21st century, people hesitate talking about menstruation in public. Media these days plays a major role in influencing the choice of masses but even today advertisements for menstrual pads uses names for their products or tries to portray the concept as such to be hidden like it should not come out in public (**Marglin, 1994**).

CONCLUSION

From studying Orthodox Jewish or Christianity or Buddhism, or Hinduism, It is clear that practices related to menstruation or menstrual taboos are prevalent and practiced in major religions and are also able to hamper the overall development (physical, social, psychological) of any woman thereby might prove a hurdle towards her progress in life. The taboos, rituals, restrictions are assigning a label of 'impure' 'unclean' 'polluting' to the menstruating woman. Hence it is the responsibility of whole society and especially media to initiate a positive dialogue on Menstruation. It can take years to change a taboo but it is the right of every human to get the right knowledge and decide rationally there after whether to follow any practice or not. To get to know the science behind Menstruation conferences, seminars, street plays can be arranged and for this to happen, NGOs should be encouraged by government to join hands in eradicating such prevalent social taboos. And finally people working towards getting rid of such taboos should be rewarded so that they spread the word forward.

REFERENCES

- ❖ Montgomery RE. (1974). A cross-cultural study of menstruation, menstrual taboos and related social variables. *Ethos*; 2(2)
- ❖ Stephens WN. (1961). A cross-cultural study of menstrual taboos. *Genetic Psychology Monograph*.; 64: 385-416.
- ❖ Chawla J. (1992). The Rig Vedic slaying of vrtra: Menstruation taboos in mythology. *Manushi*.; 68: 29-34.
- ❖ Apffel-Marglin F.(1994). The sacred groves. *Manushi*.; 82: 22-32.
- ❖ Sharma N, Vaid S, Manhas A.(2006). Age at menarche in two caste groups (Brahmins and Rajputs) from rural areas of Jammu. *Anthropologist*.; 8(1): 55-7.
- ❖ Whelan EM. (1975). Attitudes toward menstruation. *International Committee on Applied Research in Population. Stud Fam Plann. Apr*;6(4):106-8.
- ❖ Joshi D, Fawcett BN. Water,. (2001). Hindu mythology and an unequal social order in India. Paper presented at the second conference of the International Water History Association, Bergen, Norway.: 10-12. <http://eprints.soton.ac.uk/75227/>
- ❖ Ferro-Luzzi GE. (1980) Food avoidances at puberty and menstruation in Tamil Nadu: An Anthropological Study. In J. R. K. Robson (ed.), *Food, ecology and culture: Readings in the anthropology of dietary practices*. Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, New York: 93-100.
- ❖ Whelan EM. (1975). Attitudes toward menstruation. *International Committee on Applied Research in Population. Stud Fam Plann. Apr*;6(4):106-8.
- ❖ Ruether RR. (1990). Women's body and blood: The sacred and the impure. In Alison Joseph (ed.), *Through the devil's gateway: Women, religion and taboo*. SPCK, London: 7-21.
- ❖ Morrow P. (2002). A woman's vapor: Yupik bodily powers in southwest Alaska. *Ethnology*; 41(4): 335-48.
- ❖ Buddha Dharma Education Association. (2013). It is commonly believed that women are unclean. How true is this belief? *Women*

- in Buddhism: Questions & Answers. BuddhaNet. Retrieved on Aug 18, from <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/history/wbq21.htm>.
- ❖ Furth C, Shu-Yueh C. (1992). Chinese medicine and the anthropology of menstruation in contemporary Taiwan. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*; 6(1): 27-48.
 - ❖ Lhamo YC. (2006). The fangs of reproduction: An analysis of Taiwanese menstrual pollution in the context of Buddhist philosophy and practice. *History and Anthropology*. 2003; 14(2): 157-78.
 - ❖ Singh AJ. Place of menstruation in the reproductive lives of women of rural north India. *Ind J Comm Med.*; 31(1): 10-4.
 - ❖ Paul D. A report of an ICMR funded research project: Knowledge and practices of adolescent girls regarding reproductive health with special emphasis on hygiene during menstruation. National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development (NIPCCD), New Delhi. 2007.
 - ❖ Bhatia JC, Cleland J. (1995). Self-reported symptoms of gynecological morbidity and their treatment in south India. *Stud Fam Plann.* Jul-Aug;26(4):203-16.
 - ❖ Dhingra R, Kumar A, Kour M. (2009). Knowledge and practices related to menstruation among tribal (Gujjar) adolescent girls. *Ethno Med*; 3(1): 43-8.