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RESEARCH ARTICLE

MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS DURING MENSTRUATION: A REVIEW ARTICLE

¹Uzma Eram and ²Tamanna, Z.

¹Assistant Professor in the Department of Community Medicine, J.N.M.C.H, Aligarh

²Assistant consultant in KFMC in Riyadh in Emergency Department

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ABSTRACT

Menstruation is a phenomena unique to girls. However, it has always been surrounded by taboos and myths. Different cultures view menstruation differently. A menstrual taboo is any social taboo concerned with menstruation. There are very few empirical studies which comprehensively describes the psychological, social and physiological aspects of menstruation. It is important to understand the different restrictions and views of menstruating women in different religions. In this paper, we will discuss menstrual related myths prevalent in the world and their impact on women's life. Culturally in many parts of India, menstruation is still considered to be dirty and impure. Many girls and women are subject to restrictions in their daily lives simply because they are menstruating. But now-a days women have become sensitive and aware towards their health. A number of women today treat menstruation as a very normal body function. The study suggests the need for health and hygiene programs for girls. Mothers should build healthy relation with their daughters and should come out of their culture.

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INTRODUCTION

Menstruation is a phenomena unique to girls. However, it has always been surrounded by taboos and myths. Different cultures view menstruation differently. A menstrual taboo is any social taboo concerned with menstruation. There are very few empirical studies which comprehensively describes the psychological, social and physiological aspects of menstruation. It is important to understand the different restrictions and views of menstruating women in different religions. In this paper, we will discuss menstrual related myths prevalent in the world and their impact on women's life.

Review of Literature

Culturally in many parts of India, menstruation is still considered to be dirty and impure. The origin of this myth dates back to the Vedic times and is often been linked to Indra's laying of Vritras. For, it has been declared in the Veda that guilt of killing a brahmana-murder, appears every month as menstrual flow as women had taken upon themselves a part of Indra's guilt (Chawla *et al.*, 1992). Many girls and women are subject to restrictions in their daily lives simply because they are menstruating.

*Corresponding author: Uzma Eram,
Assistant Professor in the Department of Community Medicine,
J.N.M.C.H, Aligarh.

Not entering the pooja room is the major restriction among urban girls whereas not entering the kitchen is the main restriction among rural girls during menstruation (Puri *et al.*, 2006). Menstruating girls and women are also restricted from offering prayers and touching holy books (http://www.epa.be/wcm/component/option,comrepository/func,start_download/id_26/). According to a study in 2011 (Kumar *et al.*, 2011), the menstruating women emits some specific smell or ray, which turns preserved food bad. And, therefore, they are not allowed to touch sour foods like pickles. In some cultures, women bury their clothes used during menstruation to prevent them being used by evil spirits ([http://www.unicef.org/washfiles/10 case study Bangladesh 4 web.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/washfiles/10_case_study_Bangladesh_4_web.pdf)). It is also believed that a woman can use her menstrual blood to impose her will on a man (http://www.epa.be/wcm/component/option,comrepository/func,start_download/id_26/). In some parts of India, some strict dietary restrictions are also followed during menstruation such as sour food like curd, tamarind and pickles are usually avoided by menstruating women (Puri *et al.*, 2006; Kumar *et al.*, 2011). There is a belief that if a girl or women touches a cow while she is on her period, the cow will become infertile-leading girls to associate their own bodies with curse and impurity.

RELIGIOUS VIEWS

Baha I faith: Menstruating females are encouraged to pray and are not required to fast (Smith and Peter, 2000).

Christianity: Some church fathers defended the exclusion of women from ministry based on a notion of uncleanness. Others held that purity laws should be discarded as part of the old Covenant (<http://www.bombaxo.com/didascalia.html>). A menstruating women gaze is also thought to affect the weather negatively (Morrow, 2002).

Hinduism: Menstruating women are traditionally considered ritually impure and given rules to follow. They are not allowed to enter kitchen and temples, sleep in the day-time, bathe, wear flowers, have sex, touch other males or females (Bhartiya, 2013). They may not mount horse or ox or elephant nor they drive a vehicle (Guterman, 2007). Formerly during menstruation, women used to leave the main house and live in a small hut outside the village. They were not allowed to comb their hair or bathe (Apffel-Marglin, 1994; Whelan, 1975). Some studies reported provision of separate utensils also (Sharma *et al.*, 2006).

Islam: Menstruating females are exempted from prayers or fasting. Sexual intercourse is prohibited. Muslim culture advocate that menstruating women should be avoided by men (Whelan, 1975).

Sikhism: In Sikhism, the menstrual cycle is not considered a pollutant. There is no hindrance of her praying or other religious duties. The Gurus make it clear that it is a God-given process. The blood of a woman is required for the creation of any human being (10). The Gurus said that those who are impure from within are the truly impure ones.

Jewish: law explicitly forbids plainly any physical contact between male and female during the days of menstruation and for a week thereafter. Population taboos restrict playing games and sports together, directly handling or receiving objects and eating together from the same plate (Keshet, 2003). The entire period of time, from the beginning of the menses to the end of seven clean days, when the women immerses herself in the ritual bath is called *the NIDDAH PERIOD* (Guterman, 2006).

Buddhism: The menstruating females cannot take part in ceremonies.

They believe that ghosts eat blood and a menstruating woman is thought to attract ghosts and is therefore a threat to everyone around (Lhamo, 2003). In some societies in *South America*, it is commonly believed that menstruating women must kept at a distance because they are in some way harmful to men (Stephens, 1961). An article by Rose George (George, 2016) published in the *New York Times*, Dec 29, 2012, also explored menstrual taboo in *India* and found that women in some tribes are forced to live in a cowshed throughout their periods.

Common myths in Sri Lankan women (Anukshi *et al.*, 2016) are

- Period blood is dirty.
- Oily or sour food is bad for you when menstruating.
- Exercising or playing sports is bad when menstruating.
- Showering or swimming during menstruation can stop bleeding or cause infertility.
- Women on their period are crazy.

A study of *Pondicherry* (Rajkumar *et al.*, 2011) reported that 100% of women under study told that menstruating females should not enter the temple during menstruation. In 66.9% of females under study, beliefs like evil spirits entry in body of menstruating girl can be prevented by placing broom sticks or footwears or neem leaves around the girl and a woman must have purifying bath after menstruation. 64.7% of females under study believe that eating excessive sweets lead to excessive menstruation.

In *Nepal*, they have menstrual huts. These are small clay home or cowsheds located 10-15 m from the main residence. At the end of the menstrual cycle, they are purified by an oil bath. In Shaktism, the Earths menstruation is celebrated during the *Ambubachi Mela*, an annual fertility festival held in June in *Assam*, India. During *Ambubachi*, the annual menstruation course of the goddess *Kamakhya* is worshipped in the *Kamakhya Temple* (Kamakhya, 2006). The temple stays closed for 3 days and then reopens to receive worshippers (Chawla, 2002). In south-east *Nigeria* (Umeora *et al.*, 2008), a study reported various statements of the respondents like:

If you do not really hide the clothes for menses, the smell may attract rodents or even snakes.

No you do not burn the cloths used for menses for that means you will be burning human blood.

Burning the clothes or pads causes cancer and infertility because you are burning something from women and you are destroying it.

When you are bleeding and you carry a newborn female, a reaction will take place and that baby will have heavy menstruation when she grows up and it is not good.

A study reported (Anant *et al.*, 2011) various beliefs. In the *Lohra* tribe (a), among the *Scheduled Tribes* (b), it is an age-old belief that mothers do not communicate about menses to their daughters. In *Kayastha* families (c), it is believed that touching homemade vinegar or ghee during menstruation turns it bad. In *Marwari* families (d), a menstruating girl does not attend guests or serve food because the girl is considered unholy or impure. Even entering into kitchen and storeroom or sitting on the sofa or bed is prohibited. Menstruating girls do not touch new grocery items because those items are part of the kitchen and new things are not touched during menses. Girls are also reported tying a piece of black thread on their feet to reduce pain. In *Bhargava Brahmins* (e), girls having menstruation do not touch iron made things like lock and keys and so on. *Oraon* tribe (a) believes that when a girl attains menarche and if her mother tears a piece of cloth in 3 equal parts in 1 breath and give that piece of cloth to the girl to use it during menses, it reduces the abdominal pain. In *Vaishya* family (f), when the girl attains menarche, she has to cut a piece of thread of her height which her mother throws on the roof. It is believed that this reduces the duration of menstruation.

Conclusion

There are many practices and social restrictions associated with menstruation. But now-a days women have become sensitive and aware towards their health.

A number of women today treat menstruation as a very normal body function. The study suggests the need for health and hygiene programs for girls. Mothers should build healthy relation with their daughters and should come out of their culture.

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NOTES

- One of the tribe in Jharkhand.The tribes of Jharkhand consists of 32 tribes.The tribes were classified on the basis of their cultural types by late Professor L.P.Vidyarthi.
- Scheduled Tribes is an umbrella term for a heterogenous set of ethnic and tribal groups.
- Kayastha is a caste/ethnic group of India.
- Marwaris are subgroup of larger Indo-Aryan ethnic group,which inhabitat the Rajasthan region of India.
- Bhargava is a common surname in Northern India.They are descendants of Rishi Bhrigu and Parshurama.
- Vaishya is 3rd position in one of the 4 varnas(social divisions) of Hinduism.
