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Sacred Power of Menstruation versus Cultural Myths: An Interdisciplinary Overview

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Abstract:

The onset of menstruation is only a single incident in one long continuous process whereby the girl attains maturity on the physical, sexual and psychological levels. The periodic flow of blood from the woman's body has been interpreted and designated by various cultures differently. Before the medical knowledge, it was recognized as a curse and sickness. Simultaneously, there prevailed worship of women womb and menstrual blood as well. The vernacular understanding of menses has relegated the biological process to something unclean. The taboos across various cultures and religions have led the women seeing their menses as an inconvenient 'curse'. These practices further shape women's reproductive experiences and practices.

The fact is that menstruation is a biological natural function of female's body. Another school of thought believes in saving women due to their vulnerable nature during the monthly cycle from various powerful energies. It is a matter of continuous research that whether touch of women during their periods is dangerous. Various menarchist movements started in the late twentieth century. Both males and females have a role in representing menstruation as normal bodily function than as a matter of disgust and shame. The present work represents diversity of contradictory views about menstruation.

Keywords: Woman, blood, religion, science, restrictions.

1. Introduction

"Bhasmanaa shuddhyathe kamsyam
Tamtram aamlena shuddhyathi
Rajasa shuddhyathe naari
Nadee vegena shuddhyathe"

A bronze can be cleaned with Ash, Copper can be cleansed with Acid, a women will get cleansed once she completes her 4 days menstrual bleeding.¹

Woman is interpreted as the lost sex, the second sex, the inferior sex, the mystical sex and sometimes only sex!² The female is considered as a sexual object for the use and appreciation of men. The vagina is obliterated from the imagery of femininity in the same way that the signs of independence and vigour in the rest of her body are suppressed.³ Throughout history, and across cultures, the reproductive body of woman has provoked fascination and fear. It is a body deemed dangerous and defiled, the myth of the monstrous feminine made flesh, yet also a body which provokes adoration and desire, enthrallment with the mysteries within.⁴ The female body has merely been positioned as abjected or polluted, with significant implications for women's experiences of inhabiting a body so defined. One of the implications is the positioning of woman as inherently deviant, or dangerous, because of her fecundity.⁵

A woman's life can be divided into seven ages, having characteristics of mind and body setting each stage/age apart. The Age of the Unborn, Age of Infancy and Childhood, Age of Youth, Age of Maturity, Age of Marriage & Motherhood, Age of Menopause and the Age of Serenity are seven ages each woman passes through in her life.⁶ The unfolding of the seven ages is a slow, gradual and orderly process, brought about by varying levels of function of endocrine glands. Age of Youth and Age of Maturity often are mingled and overlap at times.

¹ Chanakya Niti Shastra. Chapter III, Verse 3. Available at <http://chanakya-quotes.blogspot.in/2011/04/sri-chanakya-niti-shastra.html>

² Bartsch, Elizabeth Parker. (1959) The Seven Ages of Woman, Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press p.3

³ Greer, Germaine. (1970). The Female Eunuch 18 Harper Collins

⁴ Ussher, Jane M. (2006) Managing the Monstrous Feminine 1 Taylor & Francis Group).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Supra note Bartsch, Elizabeth Parker. pp1-8

Menstruation must be borne and belied. She has been so protected from accepting her body as sexual that her menstruation strikes her as a hideous violation of her physical integrity, however well she has been prepared for it how female sexuality has been masked and deformed by most observers.⁷ A woman today will have an average of 450 menstrual cycles in her lifetime. She can lose anywhere between a couple of teaspoons (5g) to about half of cup (118g) of blood each cycle.

The seclusion of women in a special hut or shelter during those days of monthly cycle seems unconventional to me. The reality is that menstruation is a blessing, which many women do not accept. Their ostracization has created many doubts and questions in various spheres. The menstrual cycle has a powerful physiological, psychological, spiritual, metaphorical and cultural relationship to a woman. Natural periods are primal and base, raw, wild and instinctual. They are a bloody and eternal aspect of being female.⁸ However, she is considered unclean, dangerous to man, beast and crops.⁹ It is essential that feminist scholars and researchers involve themselves in the monumental task of revisioning the sacred texts from a woman-centered perspective. What we know, what informs the public discourse, the media literature.... need to be investigated sensitively and not sticking to them as androcentric constructs produced in the male voice.¹⁰ The first step toward embracing the basic needs of women's bodies is to stop demeaning them.¹¹ Whether we less demanding women are willing to settle for a lot less — just a little respect for our bodies and ourselves has been asked recently in a column.¹² The recent issue of restricting entry of women in temples and darghas in India has induced reactions from various intellectual, spiritual leaders and the youth. Just not the restriction from worshipping only has to be countered but the health and hygiene of women during periods is also fundamental.

Objectives - I don't hate my monthly cycle. For me, it is ecstasy. I am not just happy to bleed, but willing to raise awareness about the state of neglected menstrual health in India. A wise woman is one who knows, understands, values herself and works with rather than against, her natural cycles and who reclaims her sacred powers including menstruation.¹³ It is the concern of menarchists/period activists to challenge irrational conditions and restrictions imposed on females during menstruation.¹⁴ In the recent past, veteran feminists such as Pushpatai Bhawe and Vidyatai Bal had organized satyagrahas to protest against women being barred from the sanctum sanctorum of Shani Shingnapur temple. At the same time, men have raised voice and made efforts to actually make bleeding easier for women, if not happy bleeding.¹⁵

Against the above backdrop, the researcher in the present paper aims to define and discuss nature of menstruation ; discuss various schools of thought having positive and negative perception about women undergoing menstruation; and lastly examine state of menstrual hygiene in India The paper has been written with a vision to create an understanding of the fact that menstruation is not merely a women-centered issue, but concern of the nation, affecting the health statistics, environment as well as economy.¹⁶

Methodology – The present research is an outcome of inter-disciplinary examination about the religious perspectives, cultural adaptation, social norms and restrictions surrounding the issue of menstruation. A doctrinal /non empirical research has been done.

Scope – The present paper is confined to the prevalent perceptions in the social and religious systems as to menstruation. It presents an overview of the state of menstrual hygiene in India and measures taken to improve the condition. The paper targets the researchers, academicians and various stakeholders from various disciplines such as social sciences, medical sciences, legal fraternity and the decision makers as the administrators of the country.

2. Various Definitions of Menstruation

The historical connection between human fertility and the Moon even extends to the word 'menstrual'. It derives from the Latin mensis, meaning month, whilst the word 'month' is very ancient and refers to the period of four weeks as being one 'moonth'.

⁷ Supra note Greer, Germaine.

⁸ Fraser, Amy E. (2006). *Dissecting The Western Woman Artist: An Artist's Dialogue*. Available at <http://ae Fraser.com/dtwwa>

⁹ Bartsch, Elizabeth Parker. (1959). *The Seven Ages of Woman*, Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press. p.424.

¹⁰ Chawla, Janet. (1992) *The Rig Vedic Slaying of Vrtra: Menstruation Taboos in Mythology*, Manushi68 (January-February) p. 34

¹¹ ChaudhryLakshmi. *Makes women see red*. (December 5, 2015). *The Hindu*.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Gaia, *Working with the Moon: Women, The Goddess, Moon and Blood Magick*. available at <http://mirrorofisis.freeyellow.com/id51.html>

¹⁴ In 2015 Rupri Kaur, a photographer from Toronto, Canadaphoto project titled 'Period' and New York-born musician and business school graduate Kiran Gandhi, ran marathon without a tampon during her periods were praise worthy voice raising attempts.

¹⁵ Arunachalam Muruganantham, Tuhin Paul, Anshu Gupta, Kailash Brijwasi, Dharendra Pratap Singh and Ameet Mehta etc have made the monthly cycle acceptable in Indian households.

¹⁶ Taboos around sexual health reflect a level of discomfort with the female body that affects women's contribution to the economy and marks India as the third-worst nation in Asia for gender inequality. Similarly improper disposal of sanitary napkins is unfriendly for the environment. For details, see Kalawar, Jayant. (May 28, 2015). *Menstrual Health and quest for Economic Freedom within the Moon-Earth Fertility cycle*. available at <https://mythispeaks.wordpress.com/2015/05/28/menstrual-health-and-economic-freedom/> ; The Plastic Waste (Management and Handling) Rules, 2011, include certain provisions of Extended Producer's Responsibility (EPR) making producers responsible for the end of life of the products and the financing and organizing of an environmentally sound system for the management of waste generated from the products, <http://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/kicking-up-a-stink-41036>. Mahon, Thérèse & Fernandes, Maria. *Menstrual hygiene in South Asia A neglected issue for WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) programmes*. Water Aid Report finds cyclical causal relationship between the neglect of menstrual hygiene within development initiatives.

Menstruation has been defined by various medical experts; anthropologists, feminists. Scientific knowledge concerning menstruation has profoundly affected the manner in which menstruation is lived, understood, and spoken about by many women. Although many women consciously or unconsciously resist or reject the scientific understanding of menstruation, that understanding is dominant in my lived world.¹⁷ Women experience the terminal events of a cycle that has been building up all the month to menstrual cycle. Menstruation is unique among the natural bodily processes in that it involves a loss of blood. The menstrual cycle is both a physiological process and psychological process.¹⁸ It carries historically and socio-culturally determined sets of attitudes, expectations and beliefs that are intertwined with the roles of women in society.¹⁹

“We could revolutionize femcare, radically reject it and instead spill, stain, and smear everywhere. Right now slime and ooze stick my legs together. I sit in a pool of my blood. Unusually comforting, warm, and powerful. I learn to enjoy this slow transformation that my body creates. I will be glad when it is over. But for this one week a month, menstruation reminds me, inspires me, and transforms me.”²⁰

2.1. Biological Definition

- Menstruation is a discharge of blood and tissue from the lining of the uterus, which has built upon in anticipation of implantation of a fertilized egg.²¹ If pregnancy does not take place, the menstrual period usually occurs once a month and lasts from 3 to 6 days.²²
- Menstruation is the periodic discharge through the vagina of a bloody secretion containing tissue debris from the shedding of endometrium²³ from non pregnant uterus.²⁴ The vaginal discharge from the uterus of a non-pregnant woman occurring monthly from puberty to the menopause as the final phase of the menstrual cycle, containing blood and cellular debris from the shedding of the endometrium.²⁵
- The normally regular hormone-controlled 28-day cycle during a woman's reproductive years, in which ovulation occurs, and, if fertilization does not take place, the lining of the endometrium is shed, along with menstrual blood.
- The monthly loss of blood and uterine epithelial tissue is called menses.²⁶
The medical texts describe the monthly flow in overtly negative medical terms.²⁷

2.2. Ayurvedic Definition

- Menstruation, which is intimately linked with the universal ‘lunar’ cycle, is Nature’s way of helping women not only slough off the lining of the uterus, but also ‘purifying’ the system as a whole – eliminating impurities & toxins accumulated during the month. It’s like a mini-rejuvenation & internal cleansing procedure... 12 times a year.²⁸ For the body to complete this ‘natural’ process properly, the general ‘internal flow’ of a woman’s body needs to shift to an overall ‘downwards’ direction (head to reproductive area). When this downward flow occurs in a balanced way, the whole process is not only ‘pain-free’, but produces a more ‘self-referral’ state – where mind, body & emotions are more settled, integrated & attuned.
- Apana vayu is an aspect of the subtle body responsible for the circulation and physical movement of energy, wastes materials and body fluids down and out of the body. It is said to move from the navel downward to the lower pelvic gate and governs the elimination of urine and feces, the ovum and semen, as well as the downward bearing forces required for labour. When in balance, apana vayu also directs the flow of menstrual blood, contributing to a woman’s overall health, and longevity.

¹⁷ Marglin, Frederique Apffel. (1994) *The Sacred Groves*, Manushi 82 May-June, 22. She has tried to explain “bi-ology” of menstruation as well as its relationship to the self, to nature, and to culture in her world.

¹⁸ Sommer, Barbara. *Cognitive Performance and Menstrual Cycle*. (1992). In Richardson, T.E. (Ed.), *Cognitive and Menstrual Cycle* p.40 (New York: Springer-Verlag).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Shannon Docherty, “Smear It on Your Face, Rub It on Your Body, It’s Time to Start a Menstrual Party!” *Critical Theory & Social Justice : Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1.

Available at: <http://scholar.oxy.edu/cts/vol1/iss1/12>.

²¹ Goldenson, Robert. & Anderson, Kenneth. (1994). *Wordsworth Dictionary of Sex*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., p. 154.

²² Ibid.

²³ It is the tissue that covers the cavity of the uterine corpus, being endowed with a highly complex and organized histological structure.

²⁴ *Mosby’s Medical Dictionary Elsevier Health Sciences*, (06-Jun-2013) 9th ed. 1121

²⁵ *A Dictionary of Psychology* (4 ed.)

²⁶ *A Dictionary of Public Health*

²⁷ Martin, Emily. (2001). *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction*. Beacon Press available at <http://www.julietdavis.com/WST383/medicalmetaphors.pdf>.

²⁸ Maharishi Ayurveda

2.3. Anthropological Meaning

Menarche is a process which socializes a girl in ways to conduct the body due to which behaviours are created and become ones which are appreciated by society.²⁹

2.4. Spiritual Meaning

The menstrual cycle is a sequence of events that occurs once in a month in a sexually mature female.³⁰ From menarche (first menstruation) to menopause (cessation of menstruation) it is a constant repetitive pattern.³¹

Conscious menstruation refers to the profound awakening that is possible when we embrace our monthly bleeding with deep awareness and self-love.³² When you realise the process of menstruation is so deeply connected to our spiritual energies, it opens up brand new pathways for healing and living life in sync with nature. Unfortunately, many women still opt for the Pill or other hormonal treatments to 'cure' the mood swings, to stop the pain, or regulate the cycle. This disconnects us from our natural healing and cycle. It stops us from accessing our inner well of power.³³

3. Menstrual Blood: Contents and Characteristics

3.1. Composition and Characteristics

Menstrual blood contains the mixture of the endometrium (uterine lining), cervical mucus, and vaginal secretions (mucus), plasma and basic blood cells. Blood is the main component of what is collectively called menstruation blood or menstuum. Usually, it is bright or light red in color, looking like the bleeding from a cut finger especially at the onset of menstruation. It could also be brown or almost black towards the end of menses.

The average volume of menstuum is about 35 ml with a normal range of 10 to 80 ml. Most women menstruate for 2 to 7 days. In total, women spend around six to seven years of their lives menstruating. Stem cells in menstrual blood are highly proliferative and possess the unique ability to develop into various other types of healthy cells. Menstrual stem cells could turn out to be a happy medium between embryonic and adult stem cells, providing an ethically acceptable alternative that is readily accessible and appears to give rise to most of the major tissue types in the body.³⁴

3.2. Respect for Women Womb and Menstrual cycle

Menstrual cycle is the Sacred Cycle one cycle within the profound and rich life cycle of women.³⁵ It ritually and cyclically leads us to ourselves and our truths – truth which we often repress all month long.³⁶ Moon-time was considered her own personal sacred ceremony, a time where she is quite literally shedding her blood for humanity, purging and purifying herself to make room for the creative energies and life to arrive.³⁷ The root myths of Hinduism reveal the nature of this 'wine'.³⁸ The Tantras are among these more neutral texts - uterine blood considered as seed of the physiological process.³⁹ The Moon god has blessed women with purity; the Gandharva has blessed them with sweet speech. Fire is always pure and women are always pure.⁴⁰

3.3. Menstrual Cycle varies with Woman to Woman

Menstrual bleeding is viewed differently from woman to woman, family to family and culture to culture.

4. Schools of Thought on Menstruating Women

"I am a menarchist. I am a menstruator. I am menstruating."

²⁹ Das, Mitoo. (1995) *Writing the Body: An Autoethnographic Inquiry*, Man In India, (1)49 at p.56

³⁰ Saraswati, Swami Muktananda. *The Menstrual Cycle*. (1999). (Extract from *Nawa Yogini Tantra*, a Bihar School of Yoga publication) available at <http://www.yogamag.net/archives/1999/cm99/menstrul.shtml>

³¹ Ibid.

³² Sundari, Sofia. *The Power of Conscious Menstruation* (Jun 15, 2014), available at <http://www.mysticalfemininity.com/the-power-of-conscious-menstruation/>

³³ Stone, Cat Stone. (19 June 2012). *The Magic of the Menstrual Cycle Female Shamanism and Spirituality*. available at <http://naturalshaman.blogspot.in/2012/06/magic-of-menstrual-cycle.html>

³⁴ Medistem, a biotechnology firm in Tempe, Ariz. 11/30/2007 http://www.nbcnews.com/id/21996417/ns/health-cloning_and_stem_cells/t/menstrual-blood-tapped-source-stem-cells/#.VscCLv197IU

³⁵ Cloud, Gina. (2002). *Menstruation: The Sacred Cycle Redefining our menstrual cycle and PMS* available at <http://www.shemiranibrahim.com/about-shemiran-ibrahim/>

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Schwartz, Stephanie M. (2009). *Spiritual Empowerment of Women*. available at http://silvrdrach.homestead.com/schwartz_2009_jun_22.html

³⁸ At one time all gods recognized the supremacy of the Great Mother, manifesting herself as the spirit of creation (Kali-Maya). She 'invited them to bath in the bloody flow of her womb and to drink of it; and the gods, in holy communion, drank of the fountain of life -- (hices sanguis meus!) and bathed in it, and rose blessed to the heavens'.

³⁹ Samvarodaya Tantra 2:23.

⁴⁰ Yajñavalkya Smṛiti, Chapter III, Verse 19.

Menstruation has always been surrounded by a rich mythology, characterized not only by aspects regarded as positive, but also as negative. What was once powerful is now seen as a source of shame.⁴¹ We hide, ignore, obstruct and diminish our own blood, we think it is dirty, but it is sacred.⁴² It is sacred flow.⁴³

4.1. Energy Economy

“Without winter, there is no spring (Virgin phase in menstrual cycle): there is no energy, no new sprouts, no growth. Without spring, there is no summer (Mother stage, ovulation): no fruition, no completion, no abundance, love and caring.”⁴⁴

Menstruation protects the female reproductive tract against pathogens in semen.⁴⁵ The cyclical growth and retreat of the endometrium, the lining of the uterus, consumes less energy than keeping the blood-rich lining in a steady-state of readiness to receive an embryo. The metabolic cycling saves an amount of energy equivalent to six days' worth of food over four menstrual cycles, economizing on the energy costs of reproduction. The energy economy of menstruation may be of ancient origin.⁴⁶ Menstruation is an energy-saving adaptation.⁴⁷ Cyclical changes in the thickness of the endometrium, universal among mammals, are particularly evident in higher primates. By the end of the luteal phase, energy consumption of the human endometrium is seven-fold higher than its starting level. Maintaining an expanded endometrium is more costly than regenerating it in each cycle, so bleeding occurs as a side effect when blood volume is too great for efficient absorption.

4.2. Goal of Protecting Women undergoing Menstruation due to their Vulnerability

The divine feminine is a receptive vessel, a holy grail that often selflessly transmutes the energy of those around her.⁴⁸ Women are sponges for energy during their menses and can draw down huge amount of divine energy into the vacuum/ void within them.⁴⁹ In communal ceremony not intended for this purpose this could leave little or no divine energy for others.⁵⁰ To be in a big crowd with mixed energies might prove deleterious to the woman herself.⁵¹ When the womb is in the void /vacuum state of exiting during menses, she is in a highly absorbent mode making all the taboos even more important during menses.⁵²

Normally the flow of energy in people is upwards, but during the time of menstruation, the flow of energy in the woman is downwards.⁵³ In a spiritual ceremony the energy is going strongly upwards towards the Divine.⁵⁴ That means, that the flow of energy in a woman is going in the opposite direction than the energy of the ceremony.⁵⁵ A woman is energetically receptive and during the month she collects a lot of negativity from her environment.⁵⁶ So in telling women to stay at a distance it is also about protecting them from energetic disturbances.⁵⁷

A receptive time of month is when we are more sensitive to impressions and more inwardly focused, which is what happens around the time of menstruation for most women.⁵⁸ This is an energetic quality, more than a physical one. Menstruation is our “inner time,” energetically, when we turn toward ourselves and focus on our own feelings and needs.⁵⁹ This is the time to step back and take a break – to gain wisdom by evaluating and making sense of the month that has just gone by.⁶⁰

It needs to be understood that these temples are not places of prayer – they are different types of energies. The planets in the solar system have an impact upon our physiology, our psychological structure, and the context of our lives, we have created temples for the

⁴¹ Mejia, Marjory. Woman's blood Woman's power. available at <http://marjorymejia.com/womans-blood-womans-power/>

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Poberejnaia, Oxana. (June 15, 2013). Menstruation for Buddhist Women. available at <http://feminismandreligion.com/2013/06/15/menstruation-for-buddhist-women-by-oxana-poberejnaia/>

⁴⁵ 1993, Margie Profet It attracted considerable uncritical media attention despite her non-biological background.

⁴⁶ Strassmann, Beverly I. (2006). biological anthropologist in University of Michigan in

⁴⁷ Supra note Beverly Strassmann.

⁴⁸ http://www.openhandweb.org/sacred_feminine_cycle_moontime#sthash.NAiqYb2U.dpuf

⁴⁹ <http://www.wombhealing.com/sacrmn.htm>

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Vishwanand, Sri Swami Vishwananda. (May 29, 2013) available at <http://vishwanandalove.blogspot.in/2013/05/menstruation-is-purification-and-great.html>. He is founder of the Bhakti Marga community in 2005. Bhakti Marga stands for the way towards the Love within one's own heart, everyone is part of Bhakti Marga.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Hanneloré, Barbara. “Your Receptive Time: what it is...and why it is valuable”, available at

<https://thehappywomb.com/2014/06/30/your-receptive-time-what-it-is-and-why-it-is-valuable/>. Barbara Hanneloré is founder of Women's Way Moon Cycles, a creative program that embraces the natural beauty of women's cycles in a holistic and healing way.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

different planets.⁶¹ Female bodies, built to reproduce, are more “receptive and vulnerable to certain types of energies – especially during pregnancy and menstrual cycles”. As a woman is entrusted with the significant responsibility of manufacturing the next generation, her body is far more receptive and vulnerable to certain types of energies – especially during pregnancy and menstrual cycles.⁶² In the very nature of female biology, occult forces can have a deeper impact upon her system. Except for a few areas such as this one, the only places where gender should matter are bathrooms and bedrooms.⁶³ This philosophy and logic is similar to Buddhist views. Menstruation is generally viewed as a natural physical excretion that women have to go through on a monthly basis, nothing more or less.⁶⁴

Women who are menstruating are required to go at a slower pace and to allow the body to cleanse itself; you are also advised to pare down your activities to the bare essentials so that body, mind and spirit may experience the least degree of intrusion.⁶⁵

4.3. Celebration of Menarche: Coming-of-age / Kani-Peedi / Ritu Kala Samskara

When a young female experiences her first menstrual cycle, a prayer the "Coming Kala Pujan is performed. It seeks to invoke the blessings of Lord Ganesh, and The Supreme Devi Adi-Parashakti (Mother Durga) in various forms to remove all obstacles and grant success and prosperity in this new stage of the young female's life. It's a cleansing prayer that also celebrates the new stage in life she has just entered - from a child to adolescence. This ritual offers the young female and her family the chance to say good-bye to, and give thanks for, her childhood years, and to welcome her adolescent years. It provides young female teens with an opportunity to recognize and celebrate the changes in their life as they enter a new phase. The prayer service is ideal for females who are approximately in their 13th year or those who are moving from primary school into high school (i.e. the time which she first menstruates). When a female first menstruates, she is said to have 'borne the flower'.

In Assam, there are rituals performed to declare the entry of a girl into womanhood. This performance at menarche called Shanti Biya or Tuloni Biya is vital to the functioning of the Assamese society.⁶⁶ The word Shanti denotes the parents' relief when the daughter menstruates, indicating the girl's capability of getting married and producing children. The other term Tuloni is Tula or Tuli Luwa meaning a girl has been elevated to a higher social position in society. Biya means marriage.

4.4. Impurity Perception: Restrictions under Various Religions

There are established social norms or unwritten rules and practices about managing menstruation and interacting with menstruating women. Most cultures have secret codes and practices around managing periods. Menstrual blood invokes man's fear, woman's creative potential and pain, cultural taboos, the forbidden, the darkside, magic, mystery, evil, power, the primitive and the visceral.⁶⁷ It is not this blood that makes woman impure, but rather, this blood is a manifestation of her impurity; it appears when the woman can be fertile; when it disappears, she becomes sterile again; it pours forth from this womb where the fetus is made.⁶⁸ The horror of feminine fertility that man experiences is expressed through it.⁶⁹

The practice of Chaupaddi in Nepal bars menstruating women from living in their homes, and conducting daily activities such as cooking, bathing, praying, and even touching animals and plants.

4.4.1. Hinduism

On either sides, there are varying interpretations of the Hindu scriptures, while one side insisting that nothing in the religious texts prevents women from worshipping and the other on preserving tradition requires maintaining a ban on women at temples where they have not previously been permitted.⁷⁰ Woman during menstruation is referred to as a Rajsvala and should observe what is known as the Maasic Vrata.

Striyaḥ pavitram atulam naitā duṣyanti karhicit |
Māsi masi rajo hyāsām duṣkṛtānya-pakarṣati ||

⁶¹ Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev, “Shani Shingnapur Controversy – Discrimination or Discretion?”, Feb 3, 2016 available at <http://isha.sadhguru.org/blog/sadhguru/spot/shani-shingnapur-controversy-discrimination-or-discretion/>. He founded Isha Foundation in 1992. It is based at the Isha Yoga Center near Coimbatore.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Jain, Sakshi. (18 Jan 2016). Why We Need to Question the 'Religion' Behind Menstrual Taboos available at http://www.huffingtonpost.in/youth-ki-awaaz/-why-we-need-to-question-t_b_8978212.html. For details, see <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/history/wbq21.htm> ; http://www.westernbuddhistreview.com/vol4/mirror_for_women.html etc.

⁶⁵ Tiwari, Maya. Ahimsa: Preserving Women's Power to Heal <http://mayatiwari.com/womenpower.php>

⁶⁶ Supra note Das, Mitoo. at p.

⁶⁷ Fraser, Amy E. (2006). *Dissecting The Western Woman Artist: An Artist's Dialogue*. Available at <http://aefraser.com/dtwwa>

⁶⁸ Beauvoir, Simone De. (2001). *The Second Sex*. (translated by Constance Borde & Malovany C) 204: Vintage Books.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Zakaria, Rafia . (Feb 3, 2016). Places of worship are for everyone. Available at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1237073>

Women [posses] an unequalled means of purification; they never become entirely tainted. For month by month their temporary uncleanliness removes their sins.⁷¹

4.4.2. Islam

During the time a woman is menstruating or experiencing postnatal bleeding, the following eight activities are prohibited viz.- saldt (ritual prayer), fasting, recitation of even a single verse of the Holy Qur'an, touching the Quran, entering the masjid, circumambulation (tawdf) of the Holy Kabba, sexual intercourse and sexual enjoyment from the navel to below the knees of a menstruating woman.⁷² There is absolutely no problem in the husband and wife eating, drinking, and sleeping together during her menstruation. It is permissible for a menstruating woman to enter a musalla (temporary place of prayer) or the place where c Id prayer is performed as long as it is not in a masjid. The laws regarding the impermissibility of entering the masjid are not applicable to the prayer room which is not a Shar c T Masjid.

4.5. Power Justifications- if Men Could Menstruate⁷³

“So what would happen if suddenly, magically, men could menstruate and women could not? Clearly, menstruation would become an enviable, worthy, masculine event: Men would brag about how long and how much. Menopause would be celebrated as a positive event, the symbol that men had accumulated enough years of cyclical wisdom to need no more. The truth is that, if men could menstruate, the power justifications would go on and on. If we let them.”⁷⁴ The bragging would be similar to their current boasting about masturbation.⁷⁵

The patriarchal view is that menstruating women are dangerous, unstable, unreliable and untrustworthy, for them they seem to be aggressive, moody, unreasonable, destructive. Patriarchal adherents can deal with the bleeding phase – ‘the Hag’ because women tend to lack in energy and just suffer quietly on a couch during it.⁷⁶

5. State of Menstrual Health and Hygiene in India

Stigma around menstruation and menstrual hygiene is a violation of several human rights, most importantly of the right to human dignity, but also the right to non-discrimination, equality, bodily integrity, health, privacy and the right to freedom from inhumane and degrading treatment from abuse and violence. It seems that some of the taboos are slightly disappearing from practice.⁷⁷ Though there is a weak linkage statistically between the practice of socio-cultural taboos and maintenance of menstrual hygiene, the belief that menstruation is religiously impure and ceremonially unclean itself implies the scope for practice of menstrual hygiene.⁷⁸ Low cost sanitary napkins have been launched both by the government and the NGOs.⁷⁹ Sadly, sanitary napkins is a taxable item in India along with most of the developed countries.⁸⁰

⁷¹ Bühler, Georg. (1882). The Sacred Laws of the Âryas -Vâsishtha Chapter XXVIII, Verse IV. For month by month the menstrual excretion takes away her sins. A woman in her courses is impure during three (days and) nights.

⁷² The Laws of Menstruation Postnatal Bleeding & Dysfunctional Uterine Bleeding https://archive.org/stream/TheLawsOfMenstruationpostnatalBleedingDysfunctionalUterineBleeding/TheLawsOfMenstruationpostnatalBleedingDysfunctionalUterineBleeding_djvu.txt

⁷³ The situation and attitude at present when women menstruate and not men have been described by well by A.Potts -The female reproductive processes are all internal, hidden; the male processes are visible, ‘specularisable’. This is often perceived as a certain male advantage, even used to further already-present stereotypes of the female as passive in her reproductive role: the constitution of the woman’s body as lacking [a phallus] enables the penisto perform its role as [her] completer’. For details see, Potts, A. “The essence of the hard-on: hedgemonic masculinity and the cultural construction of ‘erectile dysfunction.’” *Men and Masculinities* 3, no. 1 (2000): 85-103.

⁷⁴ Steinem, Gloria. *If Men Could Menstruate*. (1986). Available at <http://ww3.haverford.edu/psychology/ddavis/p109g/steinem.menstruate.html> (From her book -*Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions*. NY: NAL,

⁷⁵ The men in India boast of masculinity publicly. For details, see India has a public masturbation problem—and no real solutions. (Jul 8, 2015) Available at <http://qz.com/446644/india-has-a-public-masturbation-problem-and-no-real-solutions/>; <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/maryanna-abdo-mumbai-colaba-masturbator-twitter/1/459176.html> State of Gujarat v. Shyam Sundar Dhobi & Another (Gujarat HC-on 5 February, 2016) it was held peeing in public doesn't outrage anyone's modesty.

⁷⁶ Supra note Poberejnaia, Oxana.

⁷⁷ Selvi, K. Tamil & Ramachandran S., (2012). Socio-cultural Taboos concerning Menstruation: A Micro Level Study in the Cuddalore District of Tamil Nadu, India. *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, 2(8) August, 6.

⁷⁸ Id.

⁷⁹ Though in 2011, Haryana exempted sanitary napkins and baby diapers form tax. Tampons and moon cups too are taxable in UK, Canada, Australia etc.

⁸⁰ WASH in Schools Empowers Girls’ Education Proceedings of the Menstrual Hygiene Management in Schools Virtual Conference 2012. New York: UNICEF.

Poor menstrual hygiene can cause fungal infections, Reproductive Tract Infection and Urinary Tract Infection which might lead to cervical cancer. Women who practice unhygienic practices are also vulnerable to infertility. Various researches have been done from time to time to study the problem.⁸¹

5.1. Poor Menstrual Hygiene in India

What Indian women need is better health rather than entry into a horribly crowded forest temple where people die in stampedes.⁸² Adolescent girls constitute a vulnerable group, particularly in India where female child is neglected one. The manner in which a girl learns about menstruation and its associated changes may have an impact process; it is linked with several misconceptions and inadequate practices, which sometimes result into adverse health outcomes. Hygiene-related practices of young girls during menstruation are of considerable importance, as it has a health impact in terms of increased vulnerability to reproductive tract infections (RTIs), interplay of socioeconomic status and menstrual hygiene practices are noticeable. Today millions of women are sufferers of RTIs and its complications and often the infection is transmitted to the offspring of the pregnant mother. Sanitary napkins can act as a preventive measure against reproductive tract infection, and can act as a precautionary measure to reduce the risk of cervical cancer. Of the 355 million menstruating women in India, only 12 per cent use sanitary napkins.⁸³ Nearly 12 percent of women who use sanitary napkins are at a lesser risk of cervical cancer than women who resort to unhygienic sanitary practices.⁸⁴ Over 88% of women resort to shocking alternatives like un-sanitized cloth, ashes and husk sand.⁸⁵ The access to sanitary napkins is far from the need of those poor women than the need for sanitation itself- closed toilets.

Access to appropriate water, sanitation and hygiene services, including clean water for washing cloths used to absorb menstrual blood and having a place to dry them, having somewhere private to change clothes or disposable sanitary pads, facilities to dispose of used cloths and pads, and access to information to understand the menstrual cycle can allow women and girls manage menstrual bleeding effectively. It is also necessary to promote better awareness amongst women and men to overcome the embarrassment, cultural practices and taboos around menstruation that impact negatively on women and girls' lives.

- Girls in several regions reveal that the topic of menstruation remains taboo and, consequently, the majority of girls experience menarche with little information.
- Cultural factors and economic constraints in India lead to poor menstrual hygiene management among girls, particularly in rural areas.
- Cultural factors and economic constraints lead to poor menstrual hygiene management among girls, particularly in rural areas.
- Evidence shows that limitations are placed on girls' mobility during their menses, which in turn limits their school attendance. More broadly within society, menstruation is found to be associated with impurity, secrecy and shame.
- Economic constraints lead to girls and women having limited access to hygienic materials for managing menses. Even girls and women who have access to sanitary pads may only change them once or twice a day.
- Limited resources also hinder access to private and hygienic sanitation facilities, both at home and in schools.

To foster better access to hygiene products, as well as economic opportunity, UNICEF supports local production and marketing of low-cost sanitary napkins.

5.2. Efforts of Government and UNICEF

Since 2013, India's sanitation policy and guidelines include menstrual hygiene management as a key element of the national campaign to achieve a clean India.

- To foster better access to hygiene products, as well as economic opportunity, UNICEF supports local production and marketing of low-cost sanitary napkins.
- To create better access to hygiene products, as well as economic opportunity, UNICEF has supported Women on Wings, a Dutch NGO, to provide women with training on sanitary napkin production, sales and marketing.

⁸¹Gupta, A Das. M Sarkar. Apr: 2008A study on menstrual hygiene among adolescent girls, Indian Journal Community medicine Vol: 33; Dongra, A.R. (2007). Management of Menstrual hygiene among rural Indian adolescent girls", World Health Population 9 (3) ; Jogdand, Keerti. & Yerpude, Pravin. (2013). A community based study on menstrual hygiene among adolescent girls. Indian Journal of Maternal and Child Health, July (3); Khan, Asif. (Nov. 2012) Perceptions and Practices about Menstrual Hygiene among Adolescent Girls in a Rural Area - A Cross-Sectional Study International Journal of Health Sciences & Research, 2(4) etc., India's population includes 225 million adolescent girls for whom MHM is relevant in terms of health, well-being and educational opportunity. (as in 2013).

⁸²Kumar, Pramod. In India, More Women Need Sanitary Napkins, Not Entry Into Sabarimala. (02/12/2015). Available at http://www.huffingtonpost.in/pramod-kumar/what-do-several-indian-wo_b_8685720.html.

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⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Ibid.

- Partnering with the Ministry of Women and Child Development, UNICEF has supported development of educational materials aimed at improving awareness about MHM in school settings and has advocated for gender-separated WASH facilities in schools.
- UNICEF advocacy helped make incinerators for safe disposal of sanitary napkins a part of the new government-supported toilet design.

The Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council is at the heart of the global movement to improve sanitation and hygiene, so that all people can enjoy healthy and productive lives. Established in 1990, WSSCC is the only United Nations body devoted solely to the sanitation needs of the most vulnerable and marginalized people. In collaboration with our members in 150 countries, WSSCC advocates for the billions of people worldwide who lack access to good sanitation, shares solutions that empower communities, and operates the Global Sanitation Fund, transform lives in developing countries through sustainable behaviour change.

6. Conclusion

The epitome of feminine functions is expressed in menstruation. It is normal, precise and unique physical evidence that a woman has achieved maturity in this phase of her being. In modern times, women do not allow menstruation interfere with the even tenor of their lives. If the justification to put restrictions upon women during periods is their receptivity to powerful negative energies; storage of energy; time given to women to unleash and understand their own strength – then the restrictions are justified. To prohibit a gender in the name of fear and impurity does not hold valid.

The so called practices rather the taboos imposed upon women undergoing menstruation actually do not have religious sanctity. Did Lord Krishna who has enunciated the Gita shlokas for days forget to tell the world about the evils and dangers of menstruation? Have we heard of Meera, devotee of Lord Krishan stops her prayers, being in periods? May we precisely find the words of the Creator himself to abandon women during these days so ruthlessly? The debate of right to worship by women during the most powerful days, rather what they as most impure days is worth the deliberations or not. It's actually not just about worshipping at a place of worship (established by the humans themselves) or at the home, but about the inclusion as a human being. It's about the right to live with dignity as envisaged by Article 21.

The immediate efforts have to be taken both by the government and the private organizations to ensure that women in India have access to reasonable sanitary pads/cloths; access to toilets and awareness about their reproductive health. More research into the linkages between girls' health, menstruation and education is certainly needed. There is need to break the silence on discussing this issue within the organization itself. Incorporating menstrual hygiene within the WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) sector involves raising awareness, hygiene education and promotion, the provision of affordable and accessible products and facilities, waste management, and the integration of these approaches into mainstream policies and programmes.

7. Suggestions

- Workshops must be organized across the country to address myths and broaden their knowledge about menstruation.
- If woman knows how her body functions at its greatest efficiency and fullest capacity, she will have more interest in knowing and will better understand – the purpose and significance of the changes in the age leading to maturity. She will have a basis for anticipating what the future has in store for her in those years. So girls and women have to be made aware.
- Conducting researches to understand new aspects of the contexts in which menstrual practices are embedded would invite more sponsorships to address the issue.
- Sensitivity training on menstrual hygiene management must be integrated into teacher training curricula.
- Peer clubs can be established focused on MHM and other activities, including mentoring by female teachers and older girls, to support and encourage girls in schools.

Let us suggest the patriarchal society to built menstrual huts for women in their reproductive age as existed in the past to seclude them in their periods. This will serve many fold purposes – the feminists' plea of paid menstrual leaves ; the satisfaction of the religious followers to restrict women participation in worship etc; rejuvenating time for women to unleash their inner strength and lastly female alone time. The housewives who are not appreciated for their heartfelt 24x7 services too would get honourable leave without waiting for someone to give them food. The disgust and shame in seclusion of women has to be replaced by celebration of womanhood at large scale. Menstrual and reproductive health must be universally recognized as a human rights concern. The road to charting solutions for menstrual hygiene and stigma attached to menstruation primarily lies with social understanding of the issue. For a developing nation like India, it is hoped that by next Menstrual Hygiene Day (May 28, 2016), the protests would be organized for menstrual hygiene, not just entry in the places of worship.

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