



Research Paper

Menstrual Taboos Through Patriarchal Lens: Vedic Traditions and North Indian Practices of Purity and Ostracism

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Abstract

Menstrual taboos have their roots in Vedic origins and the ongoing influence of patriarchy in North India. This results in the ostracism of menstruating women from everyday life. By utilizing secondary sources such as journals, books, and ancient texts, the study explores how myths, including Indra's slaying of Vritra, transformed menstruation from a sacred ritual into a representation of impurity, indicating a transition from matriarchy to patriarchy. Additionally, it examines how patriarchal structures persist in controlling women's bodies through limitations on religious involvement, domestic responsibilities, and unsanitary practices. The paper highlights significant taboo practices, including isolation, exclusion from rituals, and detrimental hygiene customs that jeopardize women's health and perpetuate gender inequality. Ultimately, it advocates for educational reforms, community involvement, and policy changes to confront menstrual stigma and enhance awareness. The study concludes that overcoming menstrual taboos necessitates a collective effort, scientific insight, and the normalization of menstruation as a natural biological occurrence.

Keywords: Menstrual Taboos, Patriarchy, North India, Women, Myths

I. Introduction

DESPITE THE REMARKABLE PROGRESS, INDIA STILL CONTINUES TO GRAPPLE WITH CHALLENGES AND ONE OF THEM IS TABOOS AROUND COMMON BIOLOGICAL PROCESS – MENSTRUATION. GIRL GET THEIR FIRST PERIOD AT THE AGE OF 14-15 (MEHER AND SAHOO, 2024) AND FROM THE STARTING MOMS, AUNTIS, AND OTHER FEMALE RELATIVES START THEIR TRAIN OF RULES AND RESTRICTION THAT WERE TAUGHT TO THEM BY THEIR MOTHERS SHOWING GENERATIONAL PASS OF MENSTRUAL TABOO.

In the northern region of India, various local terms are employed to refer to the menstrual cycle, including "maasik dharm," "mahwari," "mahney ke vo din," and "m.c." These expressions are often uttered in hushed tones, resembling a murmur, as if they are forbidden words that could tarnish the purity of women.

To better understand the Vedic origins of menstrual taboos, the most reliable source is the Rig Veda, which is a revered Hindu scripture and the oldest among the four Vedas. This text comprises over 1,000 Sanskrit hymns that were composed in the northwestern region of the Indian subcontinent between approximately 1700 and 1100 BCE. It offers valuable insights into ancient Indian mythology, culture, and philosophy, and its hymns continue to be utilized in Hindu prayers and rituals to this day. The Vedic concepts surrounding menstruation have contributed to prevalent beliefs regarding menstrual impurity and the practices of excluding women from temples, kitchens, and daily activities. These restrictions, codified in Dharma texts, serve to justify gender hierarchy, which in turn fosters the emergence of patriarchy.

Young women at the onset of their menarche often face stigma to such an extent that they become fearful of the potential difficulties associated with their experience. The echoes of the hardships endured by menstruating women reach their ears, leading to trauma as they anticipate their forthcoming reproductive lives.

Traditions established for the improvement of menstruating women are now wielded as a weapon by the patriarchal society to ostracize them.

II. Objectives

1. To comprehend the Vedic roots of menstrual taboos.
2. To understand how patriarchy contributes to the continuation of these menstrual Taboos.

3. To explore various practices associated with menstrual taboos found in North India.
4. To suggest solutions for addressing the practices surrounding menstrual taboos.

III. Literature Review

1. Janet Chawla's (1994) feminist reinterpretation of the *Rig Veda* traces the origins of menstrual taboos to patriarchal reconfigurations of earlier matrifocal traditions. Menstruation, once revered as a sacred sign of fertility and cosmic order (*ṛta*), was transformed into a symbol of impurity through myths such as Indra's slaying of Vritra. Brahmanical texts linked menstrual blood to sin, justifying women's seclusion and subordination. Symbolic shifts from celebrating female generative power to glorifying male agency reinforced patriarchal authority over women's bodies, sexuality, and roles, turning menstruation from a natural, life-affirming process into a marker of guilt, pollution, and social control.
2. Ganguly, M. Jana S., and Ganguly (2024) explored the origins of menstrual taboos, linking them to the Vedas. Furthermore, the paper emphasized the struggles that women from different regions of India face due to these myths associated with menstruation. In the final analysis, the paper offered a few recommendations for combating menstrual taboos and raising awareness among individuals who persist in following them.
3. The research paper by Garg and Anand (2015) focuses on menstruation-related myths in India, detailing the myths that are prevalent across various regions. It also highlights the significance of these myths in today's society, as well as other elements of a more progressive and advanced India. The paper presents data-based insights into the effects on both urban and rural populations in India. Additionally, the authors offered strategic approaches to address menstrual taboos in the larger societal context.
4. The paper titled "Bio-cultural Perspective on Menstruation: A Holistic Study" by Ankana Kundu, Tithi Khan, and Sudip Dutta (2025) elaborates on various diseases resulting from inadequate hygiene practices among women. This study delves into the scientific rationale behind menstrual hygiene issues. Additionally, it outlines the phases of the menstrual cycle and highlights the lack of scientific understanding regarding the beliefs surrounding its causes.
5. Meenakshi N. Taboo in consumption: Social structure, gender and sustainable menstrual products (2019) paper discusses how taboos influence consumer behavior and how the female experience is shaped by notions of right and wrong. This highlights the conceptual uncertainties surrounding pro-environmentalism, which stem from symbolic violence, as the decision-making process regarding menstrual product consumption is rooted in a deeply established patriarchal social framework.
6. Sánchez López et al. (2025) discuss the persistence of menstrual taboos in Spain. The study employed a cross-sectional survey of 4,000 menstruating women, integrating statistical analysis with thematic coding to investigate both quantitative trends and personal narratives. Findings from the research reveal the lasting effects of gendered norms concerning secrecy, cleanliness, and femininity. Despite the observation of some generational changes, menstrual stigma is still socially entrenched and continues to affect attitudes and behaviours.

IV. Research Methodology

This present research is grounded in secondary information, the researcher involved has made use of journals, articles, books, and various other references.

V. Result and Discussions

According to the first objective of this paper, it is established that the origins of these myths are rooted in Indra's defeat of Vritra. Vritra was the primary adversary of the Vedic deities. It is also noted that Vritra's name is matronymic, as his defeat can be associated with the establishment or dominance of patriarchy. Following the slaying of Vritra, it was believed that the sin incurred by Indra from killing a Brahmin was immense, prompting him to conceal himself in a lotus stalk within a lake. To absolve Indra of his sins, they were distributed among four entities: earth, water, trees, and women. In women, this sin manifests as menstruation, which occurs monthly, yet also empowers women to bear offspring.

This event is significant for comprehending the power dynamics of that era, as it illustrates the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy, with women being constrained by sins they did not even commit.

According to the second objective of this research paper, it should be highlighted how patriarchy is obsessed with controlling women's bodies. To establish this control, they have weaponized women's menstruation. They have led women to believe that something as natural as menstruation is shameful. Furthermore, they have minimized the importance of discussing it, causing young women to fall prey to misinformation and intergenerational stigmas surrounding menstruation. Another method of establishing control is evident in preventing women from entering their kitchens, engaging in other household activities, and especially temples. This dynamic has empowered patriarchal society to deny women access to numerous professions, making them feel inferior. By stigmatizing menstruation — a symbol of fertility — patriarchal culture paradoxically exerts control over the very source of life while simultaneously devaluing it.

In line with the third objective of this research paper, the practices that reinforce menstrual taboos in North India are -

1. Limitations on religious participation.

It is indeed hypocritical for North Indians, who revere female deities, to impose such stringent restrictions on women during menstruation. From the very first day of their monthly cycle, women are barred from any religious activities associated with gods and temples. This stems from the belief that during this period, a woman's body is considered weak and impure, thus unworthy of performing religious tasks. As a result of this belief, women in North India are prohibited from serving as priests, and they are even restricted from touching the tulsi plant or bathing in sacred water. This exclusion from spiritual practices creates a feeling of isolation, as if even the divine, who should be accessible to all devotees, is unavailable to menstruating women.

Only after the fifth day, when the blood has stopped flowing, is she granted permission to resume her religious activities. On this day, she should cleanse her hair, wear clean attire, and take part in any spiritual observances.

2. Physical isolation

From the onset of their menstrual cycle, women are compelled to stay in a small room outside the house, as the mere shadow of a menstruating woman is thought to bring misfortune to their husbands, fathers-in-law, and brothers-in-law in the afterlife. This experience is akin to the hardships faced by women confined to these small spaces, where they are frequently at risk of rape, snake bites, exposure to cold, or loose motions. This custom is more pronounced in the rural regions of North India and in neighbouring countries, where it is known as chaupaddi. During this period, engaging in physical relations with their husbands is forbidden. The question of whether this practice originated from malicious intent or was initially meant to provide women with rest remains contentious. Nevertheless, it has gradually transformed into the taboo that exists today.

3. Isolation from the household chores

It is astonishing how women who are subjected to daily household chores without respite are compelled to remain idle during their menstrual periods. Mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers all concur on a longstanding taboo that has been passed down through generations: the belief that menstruating women should not touch pickles, as doing so will spoil them. Furthermore, it is believed that meals prepared by menstruating women lose their vitality simply by being touched. It is incredible to think that the blood of a woman could possess such mystical properties.

4. Unsanitary practices

Despite the advancements in modern products such as pads, tampons, and menstrual cups, the situation has indeed improved in Northern India. However, many individuals remain unaware of these technologies. Pads have become commonplace in recent times, yet the generational transmission of taboos has silenced women into believing that whatever they possess is the pinnacle of innovation and suitable for their needs. This lack of discussion has resulted in improper usage of pads. Traditionally, the use of cloth was discouraged due to its composition from worn materials that were nearly rags. After use, these cloths were washed and stored for the next menstrual cycle. However, with the advent of pads, this practice has been largely replaced. Women now wear pads for extended periods, often unaware that prolonged use increases their risk of infections. Furthermore, other sustainable alternatives that are being developed are not receiving adequate promotion.

5. Rituals related to menstruation

Rituals related to the menstrual cycle commence at menarche in various areas of northern India. In these traditions, a female elder often guides the young girl to touch seven cloves and subsequently throw them away, which is thought to promote uterine health. Furthermore, some women adhere to the custom of burying a one-rupee coin in a tulsi pot or employing menstrual blood in black magic practices. These rituals, despite having no scientific backing, are still widely observed.

In accordance with the fourth objective of this paper, it is essential to take multiple steps at the individual, community, and national levels. Some of these steps are detailed below.

1. Providing education at a young age

There should be educational classes about menstrual cycle in schools for both genders, not just for girls. Parents should also educate their children at home through various playful activities from an early age.

It is essential to teach children biologically accurate information instead of allowing them to believe in culturally constructed myths.

Teachers who instruct biology in schools must possess the confidence to discuss these subjects openly, rather than avoiding them, which exacerbates the issue, particularly in rural areas of North India.

2. Community engagement

Leaders from various religious and political backgrounds should address the topic of the menstrual cycle with both empathy and scientific accuracy, rather than suppressing the discussion under the guise of modesty. They

exacerbate the issue by disseminating misinformation and perpetuating taboos surrounding menstruation. As figures of authority revered by many, it is crucial for them to approach this subject with compassion.

In this context, local NGOs and women's groups that advocate for these matters play a vital role. They can provide education to men who may not have understood these issues during their formative years.

3. Access to sanitary products

Many urban and rural areas lack adequate sanitary products. Women still rely on unsanitary cloths during their menstrual cycles. Although governments are distributing pads, they fail to reach the grassroots level to effectively address this issue. Women should also be educated about the various products available to them and the duration for which they can be used. Prolonged use of these products can lead to numerous health issues, such as RTIs, STDs, and TSS. Products like tampons and menstrual cups remain unfamiliar to many menstruating women, and it is essential to provide them with comprehensive knowledge about these matters.

4. Policy and legal measures

There should be an inclusion of menstrual hygiene management within public health and gender policies. Government should Introduce menstrual leave or flexible work arrangements during periods of discomfort this issue is being talked about in recent policy debate few states are thinking of giving 2 days leave to women having worse period. It should be Ensured that schools do not discriminate against or exclude menstruating girls from participation in activities or attendance as school is the phase where girl experience menarche school should have dispensary where menstrual pads as well as place for few hours rest is available.

5. Social transformations

Society will only evolve if the normalization of this issue occurs. Menstrual taboos are being confronted, and the myths that have persisted for centuries should be discarded. Every citizen is becoming aware of the issues surrounding something as biological as menstruation. It is high time that individuals cease using euphemisms and hushed tones when discussing menstruation; they should engage in open conversations with their family members. Father s ought to be sufficiently educated to instruct their daughters in the absence of any female relatives, while brothers should be taught to exhibit empathy rather than perpetuating stigma. Husbands should purchase pads and chocolates for their partners, providing comfort and reassurance during the challenging times of menstruation when women are already experiencing significant emotional and physical strain.

VI. Conclusion

The present research underscores that menstrual taboos in India are not merely cultural practices but deeply embedded social constructs rooted in ancient patriarchal interpretations of Vedic myths. The Rig Vedic legend of Indra and Vritra illustrates how female biological processes were redefined from sacred to impure, marking a crucial shift from matrifocal reverence to patriarchal control. This historical reinterpretation has perpetuated systemic discrimination, confining women within boundaries of ritual impurity, social exclusion, and silence.

Patriarchy, as revealed in this study, continues to wield menstrual taboos as instruments of control over women's bodies and agency. The social norms that prevent women from entering temples, performing domestic tasks, or participating in communal life during menstruation are not religiously ordained but socially constructed mechanisms that reinforce gender hierarchies. The persistence of such practices in North India reflects the enduring influence of cultural inertia, where myths have outlived their meanings and continue to dictate women lived experiences.

However, the research also points toward a gradual transformation. Increased awareness, education, and open dialogue are slowly dismantling centuries-old misconceptions. Initiatives that integrate menstrual hygiene education in schools, promote accessibility to sanitary products, and engage community and religious leaders in discourse are vital steps toward normalizing menstruation. Moreover, policy reforms that include menstrual health within the broader framework of public health and gender justice signify progress toward equity.

Ultimately, eradicating menstrual taboos requires a collective effort to replace silence with conversation, superstition with science, and shame with dignity. Menstruation must be recognized for what it truly is—a natural biological process essential to human existence, not a marker of impurity. By re-examining traditional beliefs through the lens of gender equality and human rights, society can move toward a future where every woman experiences menstruation free from stigma, restriction, and fear.

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