

Menstruation, Religion and Society

Aru Bhartiya

Abstract—All religions of the world have placed restrictions on menstruating women. Be it Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism. Sikhism is the only religion where the scriptures condemn sexism and don't impose any restriction on menstruating women. This paper discusses how a menstruating woman is treated and viewed in the major religions. Further it goes on to discuss how society treats and views menstruating women. The different facets of this topic discussed in the paper are: different euphemisms used for menstruation, sources of information for girls, advertisements and how open we are talking about this natural physiological process.

Index Terms—Menstruation, women, society, religion.

I. INTRODUCTION

Menstruation is stigmatised in our society. This stigma built up due to traditional beliefs in impurity of menstruating women and our unwillingness to discuss it normally. We don't know what may have been the reason that forced the holy men to refer to menstruating women as 'unclean'. But all religions (excluding Sikhism) refer to menstruating woman as 'ritually unclean'. The society shies away from discussing menstruation. This leads to a lot of inconvenience for young girls. They aren't informed well, hence they tend to hold several misconceptions. This paper discusses about the beliefs and norms in different religions and also how society deals with menstruation.

The practices mentioned may not be the norm in every household. The degree of following the rules and the practices followed varies from family to family. It depends on their beliefs and how strongly they hold traditional practices. Since I am a Hindu and reside in a country that is pre-dominantly Hindu I was able to garner more information on Hinduism. Hence I have a relatively longer section dedicated to Hinduism.

I will be using information from a survey I conducted.

Questionnaires were sent online to 250 girls in the age group of 20-25. 150 of them replied back from February 25 to March 25, 2013. I went to different places (shopping complexes, food joints etc.) in Jaipur and Delhi (India) and got 150 questionnaires filled by girls. I also conducted personal interviews with girls from different religions and different parts of India.

II. RELIGION

A. Judaism

The Jewish code of law, *Halakha*, details strict rules

governing every aspect of the daily lives of Jews, including their sexual lives. It prohibits literally any physical contact between males and females during the days of menstruation and for a week thereafter [1], [2]. 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' [3].

The Book of Leviticus is the third book of the Hebrew Bible and the third of five books of Torah. In the chapters on Unclean discharges, Sexual behavior and Grave Crimes¹ we find mention of the following:

- In Leviticus 15:19 and 24 we are told: "If a woman has an emission, and her emission in her flesh is blood, she shall be seven days in her (menstrual) separation, and anyone who touches her shall be *tamei* (interpreted as ritually unclean commonly by people) until evening...And if any man lie with her at all and her (menstrual) separation will be upon him, he will be *tamei* for seven days...."
- Leviticus 18:19 warns: "Also you shall not approach a woman in the tum'ah of her (menstrual) separation, to uncover her nakedness."
- Leviticus 20:18 states: "And if a man lie with a menstruating woman and reveal her nakedness, and she revealed the fountain of her blood, both of them will be cut off from among their people."

The first law talks about how the women and the one who touches her during her menses are ritually unclean. The next two laws explicitly state that one may not have intercourse with her.

There is also a mention of woman's separation from others that occurs after giving birth: for a daughter, the mother is separated from others for fourteen days, and then is fully 'clean' after 66 days, she may then bring a sacrifice to the temple. For a son, she is separated for seven days, and then waits thirty-three days.

According to a ritual, an Orthodox Jewish wife is responsible for immersing in the *Mikvah*, the ritual bath, and only then will she become 'ritually clean'.

B. Christianity

The history of menstrual taboo has been a major reason to keep women from positions of authority in Christianity [4]. Just like in Judaism it's the belief of many Catholics that woman should not have sexual intercourse during her menses.

In the Eastern Orthodox Christian Church, menstruation is considered unclean. Partaking of sacraments, especially communion, or touching holy items like Bible or religious

Manuscript received June 5, 2013; revised August 2, 2013.

Aru Bhartiya is with the Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee, India (e-mail: aru.bhartiya@gmail.com).

¹ Unclean discharges (Ch.15), Sexual behavior (Ch.18) and Grave Crimes (Ch.20)

icons are not allowed for menstruating women. This is not a universal practice, but it hasn't gone away entirely.

Russian Orthodox Christians believe in menstrual taboos. Menstruating women have to live in secluded huts during this time. They don't attend church services, cannot have any contact with men, and may not touch raw or fresh food. A menstruating woman's gaze is also thought to affect the weather negatively [5].

While western Christian denominations are less extreme, some negative attitudes still remain.

C. Islam

In the Quran, 2:222 reads, "They ask you about menstruation. Say, 'It is an impurity, so keep away from women during it and do not approach them until they are cleansed; when they are cleansed you may approach them as God has ordained...'" [6]. This clearly shows that Quran only stipulates one prohibition for menstruating women, which is abstinence from sexual activity. Some interpreters have expanded upon this concept to state that, menstruating women have to stay away from their male family members. Also, an interviewee stated that, one is not allowed to read the Arab Quran but can read from the translations in other languages.

From what I gathered after interviewing a few people is, that in Islam menstruating women aren't supposed to touch the Quran, enter the mosque, offer the ritual prayer or have sex with her husband for seven full days. The woman is exempted from rituals such as daily prayers and fasting, although she is not given the option of performing these rituals, even if she wants to [7]. Like Judaism the woman has to complete a ritual washing before she becomes clean again.

D. Buddhism

From a Buddhist point of view menstruation is "a natural physical excretion that women have to go through on a monthly basis, nothing more or less."² However in practice this is not followed. It is because of the influence Hinduism has had on Buddhism. Many temples do not allow women to circumambulate around the Stupas. There is clear evidence of this rule in Thailand.

During menstruation women are thought to lose *Qi* (commonly spelled as *chi*, is believed to be part of everything that exists, as in 'life force', or spiritual energy.) There's a Buddhist belief that ghosts eat blood. A menstruating woman is then thought to attract ghosts, and is therefore a threat to herself and others. An example cited by the Buddha Dharma Education Association says, that while fermenting rice, menstruating women are not allowed near the area or the rice will be spoiled.

E. Sikhism

Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, condemned the practice of treating women as impure while menstruating. Menstruating women are allowed to visit Gurudwaras

(religious place of Sikhs) and offer prayer. There is no restriction to movement in the house or outside. Guru Granth Sahib (Sikh scripture) boldly rejects sexism. It affirms women's creative and natural processes in the social fabric. It condemns the taboos surrounding menstruation and post-partum pollution. Rather, menstruation is regarded as an essential and natural process [8]. Guru Nanak openly chides those who attribute pollution to women because of menstruation and asserts that pollution lies in the heart and mind of the person and not in the cosmic process of birth [9].

A girl I interviewed said, "Ours is a fairly new religion compared to others so no mythological concepts or superstitions are present. We are allowed to visit our religious places, go to kitchen etc. everywhere. But out of respect for Hindu's beliefs I don't go inside the Hindu temple during my period."

F. Hinduism

In Hindu mythology it's believed women got '*Rajaswala Dosha*' (menstruation) when Lord Indra (the king of gods) severed the head of Vishwaroopacharya (the second teacher of the gods). Since Lord Indra killed a Brahmin he got '*Brahmahatya dosha*'.³ He got rid of it by distributing it amongst the *prithvy* (land), *samudra* (water), *vriksha* (tree) and *stree* (women folk) [10]. The women from that day on started menstruating every 28-30 days and got the ability to give birth. Hence it's believed that menstruation is a *dosha*.

In Indian yogic philosophy there are three *gunas* (or qualities). These are *tamas* (black), *rajas* (red) and *sattva* (white). Anything that is an excretion from the body i.e. sweat, blood, tears etc. are toxic and are hence classified under *tamas*. *Tamas* is darkness or obscurity. Hence for traditional Hindus touching a menstruating woman is considered a '*Tamasic*' (inappropriate) act.

During menstruation some women aren't allowed to enter the kitchen and temples, sleep in the day-time, bathe, wear flowers, have sex, touch other males or females, talk loudly, and touch pickle. According to mythology a pickle touched by a menstruating woman rots away. The basil plant is considered to be holy in Hinduism; hence menstruating girls aren't allowed to touch it. In some extreme cases they aren't allowed to let even their shadow fall on it or it's believed the plant will die.

According to Hindu culture, women aren't allowed to visit temples while menstruating. The boards outside the temples read: 'Ladies in monthly period are not allowed'. In 'Sabrimala' temple, Kerala (India), women from the age-bracket of 10-50 years are not allowed to enter the temple. They conduct a ritual called, '*Ashtamangala Devaprashnam*' (ascertaining the lord's will), to establish the truth whether a female had defied the temple by gaining entry into the sanctum sanctorum. If the results of the ritual are not accepted by chief priest it means someone has defied the rule.⁴ Hence we see that women are considered 'ritually

²This is from an answer by Buddha Dharma Education Association to the question: "It is commonly believed that women are unclean. How true is this belief?" This question was asked in "Women in Buddhism: Questions & Answers, 2004, BuddhaNet.", Available: <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/history/wbq21.htm>

³ *Brahmahatya Dosha* is a sin occurred due to killing of a Vedic Brahmin.

⁴ In 2011, there was a court case against an actress named Jayamala. She was accused for having touched the idol of Lord Ayappa of Sabrimala Temple in 1987

unclean' while menstruating and aren't allowed to visit temples or pray to deities.

In the survey conducted, 46% of girls in the age bracket of 20-25 years said that they enter the temple while menstruating, 18% said they are allowed after a few days. This just shows that girls nowadays don't follow this rule earnestly and have realized that this rule was relevant before sanitary products came into existence. It was imposed to maintain the cleanliness in the temple. But now it's just a redundant rule. A few of the 36% others who still abide by this rule stated: "I wouldn't have even that imposed on me but I don't want to unnecessarily offend people and I respect their beliefs." Only 4% felt that we are impure during our menstruation and should feel guilty while praying.

In certain parts of India and Nepal women aren't allowed to live in the residence with other family members. I talked to a woman from a village in Andhra Pradesh, South India she said that during her menses she had to stay in a separate section of the house, built at the back exclusively for this. She wasn't allowed to go out of the house, but when there was a compulsion to go out (going to school etc.) there was a separate door for her to use. This is a very common practice in Hindu households. They also had to cook their food themselves and eat separately.

In Nepal they have 'menstrual huts'. These are small clay homes or cowsheds located 15-10 meters from the main residence. If the woman has a child she stays with him in the hut. At the end of the menstrual cycle they are purified by an oil bath and only then do they become ritually clean again. There are reports of hundreds of women dying in these homes due to snakebites, severe cold and smoke inhalation. Girls have even been raped during this time.⁵ If they don't follow *chaupadi* (a tradition that forces menstruating woman to live in menstrual huts) they are blamed for misfortunes like animal attacks, crop failures and water shortages. Though, this practice was banned by the Nepal Supreme Court in 2005 yet it is prevalent. In a district Achham, around 85% women still continue the practice [11]. In a video titled 'Chaupadi: A sexist custom' by UNFPA (The United Nations Population fund, 2008) we see that these women don't like following this tradition but they still have to, otherwise they will be ostracized from the village.

Paradoxically, in certain parts of India whilst menstrual prohibitions are widely practiced, so is the celebration of girl's menarche (the first menstruation cycle). This shows that the first blood is a cause for joy and womanhood, a source of pride. Ceremonies involving food, family, friends, bath and gifts are customary in Nepal, South India and amongst tribal people.

One of the interviewee was from Bodoland (a tribal area in Assam, India). She said menarche is celebrated. There are numerous rules imposed on the girl: she is not allowed to go out of the house, not allowed to see the sun, she has to cook her own food and should not be seen by any man. At the end

of the period a grand celebration, known as small marriage, takes place. In the morning the girl is married to a banana tree and the sun lord is worshipped. In the evening a celebration takes place in which all the ladies are invited.

The interviewee from Andhra Pradesh said there was a celebration for her menarche. She mentioned that she didn't like it and felt shy and angry during the whole event since she felt it unnecessary to make a public announcement about her start of menstruation. She was given an oil bath (oil baths are given to mark an auspicious occasion). People were invited for lunch and she was given gifts. She was given a new silk *saree* to wear. Before this day she used to wear *ghaghra* and *choli* (traditional blouse and skirt). She also added that she would never hold the ceremony for her daughter.

We notice that in Hinduism they have many restrictions but along with that in a few regions of India there are ceremonies to welcome the girl to her fertile age. But after that celebration she has to live a restricted life for 7 days every month.

III. SOCIETY

Since I have conducted the survey amongst Indian females hence some of the observations (like examples of euphemisms) could be specific to the Indian context only. But I have used the internet for most of the sources and used a study by 'ubykotex' which was done on females in US & Canada.

A. Euphemism

'*Kapde kab aenge?*' (When will your clothes come?) This is how my grandmother was asked whether she was menstruating or not. Since the past century, due to urbanization and modernization, these euphemisms have altered. Euphemism is an agreeable or inoffensive expression for one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant.

Menstruation is a recurrent event in a woman's life and so can't be avoided in conversations, hence strategies or euphemisms for making it indirect or polite are found. From the survey conducted, in India the commonly used euphemisms nowadays are: periods, down and chums. Apart from these, girls tend to use some other expressions also. These expressions that are used by groups of people can be called personalized euphemisms. I am citing an example of a personalized euphemism from my own experience: my ex-room-mate used the expression, "*gala kharab ho gaya*" (I have a sore throat). In many popular movies like *Carrie* and *Juno* euphemisms are used to represent menstruation humorously, traumatically and sarcastically. Euphemisms make females more comfortable while talking about it.

In 1996, during the running of the 100th Boston marathon, Uta Pippig, the first woman to cross the finish line, had visible menstrual blood and severe menstrual cramps. Commentators on radio and TV were, uncharacteristically, tongue-tied and used words like "Physical problems and diarrhea," others stopped at the phrase 'physical problems' or 'stomach pain'. Eileen McNamara's *Boston Globe* article that said she "bled all the way from Hopkinton to Boston" was subject to mass criticism. This shows how we look down

⁵ There are reports on this. Example: Harley Rustad, "Nepalese menstruation tradition dies hard", *The Globe and mail*, April 2003, Available: <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/nepalese-menstruation-tradition-dies-hard/article11644844>

upon someone directly mentioning anything related to menstruation.

B. Source of Information

Even though there were advertisements way back in 1935 titled 'Have you wondered, "How shall I tell her?"', till now many mothers don't tell their daughters about the menstruation cycle. They shy away from talking about it. According to a study by Ubykotex more girls nowadays are turning to sites (63%) than to their mothers for information on this topic.⁶ In the survey conducted by me 51% respondents said that they were explained about menstruation by their family before their menarche, 41% had no idea about it before their menarche and the other 8% acquired the knowledge from other sources. Amongst the other sources the most commonly cited were seminars at school and internet sites.

The survey I conducted mostly consisted of girls in the age group of 20-25 years. Out of these 41% got to know about menstruation after getting it. There are also many myths and misconceptions about menstruation. Examples of widely held misconceptions: one can lose a tampon in one's vagina and menstruating women should not exercise and menstruation leads to heavy blood loss leading to anemia.⁷ Isn't it time girls get the facts and commit to learning more about their bodies and health? Without proper information some girls tend to feel ashamed and tend to breed many misconceptions.

C. Discussing it

84% females said they feel comfortable talking about menstruation with other females. This number does not support observations. Even though my hostel is an all-girls hostel still we hide the pads under our sleeves and go to the washroom. One is very discreet when asking for a pad/tampon in case of an emergency. And even in an all girls discussion one uses euphemisms and is careful to not be very direct.

In the last section we saw how only 51% were informed by their family (mostly mothers do the talking in this case). This number just goes to show how much women dread having 'the talk' with their daughters. But such a situation can end up making the first period a very embarrassing situation for the girl. It might actually be the starting point for a girl to start being terrified of her monthly period.

When I went (in person) to request people to fill the questionnaire approximately 70% of the girls read the topic and giggled. Out these 50% of them refused to fill it. They found talking about it very out of place and shied away from it.

In the survey the girls were asked 'Do you feel comfortable talking about menstruation with males?' 62% answered in negative. They think it might gross them out. And few of the girls who answered in the affirmative did so because they don't shy away from discussing it with their boyfriends.

⁶ This information is used from a survey conducted by Ubykotex in 2012, named 'Generation Know'. It was conducted among females age 14-35 residing in the United States and Canada.

⁷ The amount of blood and fluid lost is usually between 4 and 12 teaspoons each menstrual cycle. (Source: WebMD)

I read quite a few discussions online and noticed that the ones particularly started by men held a very negative and exaggerated perception of menstruation. They think it's a time when women go crazy and blame everything on PMS (Premenstrual syndrome). Quite a few were completely grossed out by it and the odour repelled them. This perception that is widely held by boys can be because they aren't very well versed with menstruation.

D. Advertisements

Advertisements are instrumental in forming people's views. Since advertisements have to be effective and appeal to values that are widely accepted in society, by studying advertisements one can see how people think and talk about things. These advertisements are the ones that create the fear of staining, leaking, bulging and smelling in us. They use the classic advertising technique- 'You got the problem, we have the solution.'

Femcare companies sell their products using shame. This in turn extends the stigma around talking about menstruation openly. Ads for menstrual sanitary products never show menstrual blood (though in 2010 an ad by *Always* had a neat drop of blood). They replace the blood with a 'blue liquid' to show absorptiveness. The fact that it was and still is unacceptable to show blood on TV or print shows people's approach to it in everyday life. Discussing about menses is considered offensive and disgusting.

E. Impure

In Judaism it's believed the woman is impure until she's had a ritualistic bath. Many orthodox people believe women are impure during menstruation and should not be allowed to pray or enter religious places. There was even a study by scientists from Harvard to see whether menstrual blood was poisonous or not (Obviously it was found to be non-poisonous).

92% girls said that they don't think we are impure during our menstruation cycle and we shouldn't feel guilty to pray. It should be taken into consideration that the responders were females in the age -group of 20-25 years and are well educated. This belief is not widely held since we have seen menstruating women are not allowed in religious places.

Even Gandhi⁸ used to say that menstruation was a manifestation of the distorted souls of women because of their sexuality. He believed that when a woman's souls became pure, then she would automatically stop menstruating.

IV. CONCLUSION

We can see that similar taboos exist across religions and cultures. Some of the most consistent practices followed include isolation, exclusion from religious activities and restraint from sexual intercourse. Women are still prohibited even by the 'modern' religions to enter the temples. Also what is common in all religion is the age-old idea of spiritual impurity, which doesn't seem to go.

In society one tries to avoid the subject of menstruation.

⁸ M.K. Gandhi is a prominent spiritual and political leader of India. He is considered the Father of the nation.

Discussing it with males is particularly a discomfort. The manner of discussing menstruation and how it's represented in advertisements and movies shows our uneasiness.

It is about time we try and break the stigma around it. We need to create an environment where girls can access information and ask questions without shame, embarrassment and without judgment. That can only happen if we don't treat it as a stigma and talk freely and openly about it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to thank all the responders to my questionnaire and all the interviewees who responded to my one-on-one questioning. A special thanks to Mrs. Latha Ganesh and Ms. Miranda Boro for their contribution.

REFERENCES

- [1] S. D. Eider, *Halachos of Niddah*, New York: Feldheim Publishers, 1999, pp. 2003-2014.
- [2] J. K. Orr, "Jewish women and sexuality," *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2003, pp. 215-224.
- [3] M. A. Guterman, "Identity conflict in Modern Orthodox Judaism and the laws of family purity," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, vol.18, no. 1, 2006, pp. 92-100.

- [4] W. E. Phipps, "The Menstrual Taboo in the Judeo-Christian Tradition", *Journal of Religion and Health*, vol. 19, no. 4, 1980, pp. 298-303.
- [5] P. Morrow, "A woman's vapor: Yupik bodily powers in southwest Alaska," *Ethnology*, vol. 41, no. 4, 2002, pp. 335-348.
- [6] *The Quran*, translated by Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, 1st ed., Goodword Books, 2009, vol. 2, pp. 222
- [7] S. A. Azeem. (1995). Women in Islam versus women in the Judaeo-Christian tradition: The myth and the reality. *Islam - The Modern Religion*. [Online]. Available: <http://www.themodernreligion.com/>
- [8] N.-G. K. Singh, *Sikhism: An Introduction*, London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., pp. 111.
- [9] A. H. Kaur. Sikhism and the status of women, Issue 51, *Sikh Spirit*. [Online]. Available: <http://www.sikhspirit.com/khalsa/news51.htm>
- [10] A. C. B. Swami, "Srimad Bhagwatam Canto," vol. 6, Part 2, Mumbai, India, *the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust*, 1975, ch.13.
- [11] M. Budgen, "From menstrual huts to drinking blood: The weird and wacky world of cultural attitudes to menstruation part1," *Ruby Club*, April 13, 2013.



Aru Bhartiya was born in Rajasthan (India) in 1993. She is pursuing bachelor's in technology in civil engineering from Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee(India).

She has volunteered as a teacher at Lha Charitable Trust, Dharamshala(India). She is interested in Women's Studies and Refugee studies.