

REVIEW ARTICLE

A Dialogue on Menstrual TabooManju Kaundal¹, Bhopes Thakur²¹Ishar Jyot Degree College, Pehowa, Kurukshetra, Haryana, ²Department of Biosciences, Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla, Himachal Pradesh, India

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Citation

Kaundal M, Thakur B. A Dialogue on Menstrual Taboo. Ind J Comm Health. 2014;26 (2); 192-195.

Source of Funding : Nil, **Conflict of Interest:** None declared**Article Cycle****Date of Submission:** 14/12/2013, **Date of Acceptance:** 24/05/2014, **Date of Publication:** 15/06/2014**Abstract**

Today in the 21st century, we may boast of gender equality and women empowerment but the truth is somewhat implausible. Today women may have excelled in many spheres of life but, somewhere, she is still struggling to get out of her veil. In the name of tradition a women is always told to follow the rules what the society has set for her. A look at major religions of the world shows that, without exception, they have placed restrictions on menstruating women. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism have all made statements about menstruation and its negative effect, leading to prohibitions about attending places of worship, cooking, physical intimacy and sometimes requiring women to live separately at this time. Present paper is a compilation of the information available on the menstrual taboo and various practices regarding it. For this extensive search was done on internet along with personal observations. The present study is carried out in order to provoke the need for increased research on the psychosocial aspects of menstruation by exploring the attitudes of society toward this monthly event.

Key Words

Menstruation; Taboo; Religion; Women

Introduction

A taboo is a strong social prohibition or ban relating to any area of human activity or social custom that is sacred and forbidden, based on moral judgment and sometimes even religious beliefs. Breaking the taboo is usually considered objectionable by the society. Menstrual taboo is one such widespread social taboo. It is no wonder that primitive religions incorporated taboos around the menstrual process. Menstruation is a natural physiological phenomenon experienced by a woman every month after attaining puberty and continues till menopause. Menstrual fluid contains the endometrial tissue of uterus and blood, along with an unfertilized egg. This is a cyclical process, which is controlled by hormones produced in both the brain and ovaries of the female and prepares women's reproductive organs for pregnancy. If pregnancy does not occur, the lining begins to break down and discharges from the body through the vagina as the menstrual flow.

Without proper understanding of the underlying biological basis, menstruation can look quite threatening. There is a recurrent bleeding, every twenty-eight days, without any apparent wound or injury. As the menstrual cycle mirrors that of the moon, it appears supernatural. Further confusing is the fact

that menstruation occurs exclusively in females, disappears during pregnancy, and stops at middle age [1].

Existing data regarding the menstrual cycle is very uncategorical and confusing. Due to which, menstruation has been connected with ideas of horror, danger, shame and sin, among the primitive as well as most civilized people. Many societies currently consider menstrual blood dangerous, especially to men, and religious, domestic and sexual taboos have been established to ward off its mystical powers. For example, in primitive societies such as the Arapesh of New Guinea, the newly menstruating girl is isolated from the community in a cave, cage or hole in the earth, dark hut or other enclosure symbolizing a womb. In 40 such societies throughout South America, it is commonly believed that menstruating women must be kept at a distance because they are in some way harmful to men, and as this fear increases taboo restrictions become more elaborate. [2] There are very few empirical studies which comprehensively describes the psychological, social and physiological aspects of menstruation. The objective of this article is to strike a chord in the society so that Researchers go ahead and take this really forgotten issue forward.

Religious beliefs

There are many religions, which to this day, hold primitive ideas and beliefs regarding this common phenomenon. Hinduism views the menstruating woman as impure or polluted [3, 4] and is referred to in some places to have a curse. [5] The impurity lasts only during the menses, and ends immediately thereafter. 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. [4, 6] In other words, menstruating women did not have access to water when they needed it for personal hygiene. Some recent studies witnessed prohibitions to cook food [7], and provision for separate utensils. [5] Entry to the prayer room within home and the temple is strictly forbidden. [3, 5, 6, 8] A woman experiencing her period cannot be part of religious ceremonies for the first 4 days of the cycle. Some studies also recorded restrictions regarding mounting a horse, ox, or elephant, as well as driving a vehicle. [9] Ferro-Luzzi also found various food restrictions during menstruation, including fish and meat. In particular, menstruation has to be a private event. [8] There is a strong taboo against menstruation being made known in a public sphere. [4]

Jewish law explicitly forbids plainly any physical contact between male and female during the days of menstruation and for a week thereafter. Popular taboos restrict playing games and sports together (e.g., ping-pong, tennis), directly handing or receiving objects (they must be placed down onto a surface, and then may be picked up by the spouse), and eating together from the same plate. [10]

In early western cultures, the menstruating woman was believed to be dangerous, and social restrictions were placed upon her. In fact, it was claimed that a menstruating woman would cause bacon to putrefy. [9] The history of the menstrual taboo has been a major reason in the decision to keep women away from positions of authority in Christianity. [6, 11] A menstruating woman's gaze is even thought to affect the weather negatively. [12] Mayan mythology explains the origin of menstruation as a punishment for violating the social rules governing marital alliance. Some Christian denominations including many authorities of the Eastern Orthodox Church, advise women not to receive communion, perform prayers and fasting during their menstrual period. Conservative/traditionalist female members of the Orthodox Church observe the ancient practice of abstaining from Holy Communion during menstruation.

Muslim culture advocates that menstruating women should be avoided by men. [9] Though Islam does not consider a menstruating woman to possess any kind of contagious uncleanness [13], but do treat

menstruation as impure for religious functions. [14] There are two main prohibitions placed upon the menstruating woman. First, she may not enter any shrine or mosque. In fact, she may not pray or fast during Ramadan while she is menstruating. [14] She may not touch The Quran or even recite its contents. [9, 15] Secondly, she is not allowed to have sexual intercourse for seven days (beginning when the bleeding starts). She is exempted from rituals such as daily prayers and fasting, although she is not given the option of performing these rituals. [13]

In Buddhism, menstruation is generally viewed as a natural physical excretion that women have to go through on a monthly basis, nothing more or less. [16] However, Hindu belief and practice has carried over into some categories of Buddhist culture, under the influence of which, menstruating women cannot meditate nor can they have contact with priests. They cannot take part in ceremonies, such as weddings. [17] There is also a Buddhist belief that ghosts eat blood and a menstruating woman is thought to attract ghosts and is therefore a threat to everyone around. [18]

In Sikhism, a woman is given equal status to man and is regarded as pure as man. The Gurus teach that one cannot be pure by washing his body but purity of mind is the real pureness. They are not called pure, who sit down after merely washing their bodies. [19] Besides Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, also condemned the practice of treating women as impure while menstruating.

The similarities among the major religions regarding their beliefs about menstruation are striking. Some of the more consistent themes include isolation, exclusion from religious services, and restraint from sexual intercourse. The difference between the major religions lies in the level of severity of the menstrual taboos. Buddhism and Christianity offer a lenient view of the menstruating woman, while Judaism has the strictest view and Sikhism is the most liberal.

Indian scenario

In the existing Indian cultural milieu, the society is interwoven into a set of traditions, myths and misconceptions especially about menstruation and related issues. Menstruation is generally considered as unclean in Indian society. Isolation of the menstruating women and restrictions imposed on them in the family have reinforced negative attitude towards this phenomenon. Several studies [20, 21, 22] have reported restrictions in daily activities like taking bath, changing clothes, combing hair, cooking food and entering holy places. A woman is even barred from touching pickles. It is also assumed that if a snake is present in the vicinity of a menstruating woman, it becomes blind and never moves out from that place. Along with cultural constructs which lead to formation

of a certain preconception, the reaction to menstruation also depends upon awareness and knowledge about the subject. There are substantial lacunae in the knowledge about menstruation. Several research studies have revealed this gap [21, 23, 24] and showed that there is low level of awareness about menstruation among girls when they first experience it. Social prohibitions and negative attitude of parents in discussing the related issues openly has blocked the access of adolescent girls to right kind of information especially in rural and tribal communities. Further, their strong bond with the traditional beliefs, taboos and misconceptions during menstruation has led to many serious health problems. Poor personal hygiene and unsafe sanitary conditions result in the girls facing gynaecological problems. [25, 26]

The health problems and complications are the result of inaccurate and incomplete information provided to the girls through limited sources. Many studies have revealed that mothers, teachers, friends, relatives, television and books are the main source of providing information about menstruation to the adolescent girls. [27, 28] However, it is also seen that information received from these sources is often partial. One common way, that even sanitary-product advertisements avoid mentioning menstruation is by pouring a blue liquid on the sanitary item to demonstrate its absorptiveness. [29] This shows the stigma surrounding the blood associated with menstruation. The invention of the tampon may have been inspired by the taboo, as tampons are more discreet.

A study by Dhingra et al, in Jammu and Kashmir, revealed that girls lacked conceptual clarity about the process of menstruation before they started menstruating due to which they faced several gynaecological problems. [30] The most common source of information about menstruation for the majority (83%) of the sample girls were friends. There were several socio-cultural taboos related to menstruation. The level of personal hygiene and management of menstruation was found to be quite unsatisfactory. 98% of the girls believed that there should be no regular bath during menstrual cycle. All the girls reported following these cultural practices without much questioning. The results hold implications for professionals involved in improvement of adolescent reproductive health in particular.

An article by Rose George 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. There are health issues, like infections caused by using dirty rags. [31]

Conclusion

Myth, mystery and superstition have long enveloped the facts about menstruation. In India, mere mention of the topic has been a taboo in the past and even to this date the cultural and social influences appear to be a hurdle for advancement of the knowledge of the subject. It is important to understand the different restrictions and views of menstruating women in different religions. One reason for this importance is the fact that there are many people who still follow these taboos, e.g. Hindus, Muslims, and Orthodox Jews still abide by these taboos. An understanding of these religious and cultural beliefs will help in dealing with people of respective faiths. In modern time, women still feel that they must hide their menstrual cycle. This is clearly evident from the marketing of products that allow them to do so; they promise women a sanitized, deodorized, and fresh bodily presentation. [32] The origins of these stigmas are in the different religions described above. By learning the origins, we can more effectively combat their continuance. Research is beginning to focus on this area. Guterman researched the observance of the laws of family purity among Modern-Orthodox Jews and found that many of the laws were not being followed. [33]

This paper provides a sociological explanation of how menses can play an important role in the way of living of a society. It comes alive socially and makes its presence felt in the cultural realm in the form of rituals at menarche, taboos and restrictions throughout one's menstrual life and the gendered meanings that are constructed as a result of the following of such taboos. Whatever kind of gender asymmetry may be, it is there and it never ceases to surprise one that a physiological condition like menstruation can give such meaning to the social world of men and women. Menstruation showed the numerous types of roles women engage in, to sustain their "feminine" space within the society. The taboos, restrictions and rituals are replete with the subtle manner in which they bring about the oppression of women by assigning them the status of a pollutant. This status itself can never allow women to rise up to a better status and be equal to men. Moreover, the taboos being connected as part of the tradition will not disappear from the lives of women, as they believe that traditions are to be respected and kept intact to maintain one's identity.

Recommendation

Basically menstrual taboos are hampering the development of woman, thereby tumbling her contribution towards national progress. As educated citizens it is our responsibility to liberate women from this virtual binding. Undoubtedly, it can take years or may be even generations, to change a taboo, but it has been noted that the only girls who don't believe the superstitions about menstruation are those with

educated mothers. So the best way to change the minds of future women is to educate girls. Health education should be made compulsory at school level with special emphasis on the menstruation and related taboos. NGOs should be encouraged by government to come forward and join hands in the eradication of this widespread social taboo. The common man is not aware of the science behind menstruation, therefore conferences, seminars, debates and street plays etc. can be organized to spread awareness regarding menstrual process, associated taboos and related health problems. And finally, people who confer their contribution in getting rid of this social evil should be rewarded. This will encourage other people to volunteer and make a difference.

Authors Contribution

MK: conception and design, acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data; drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content; BT: final approval of the version to be published.

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- Only they are pure, O Nanak, within whose minds the Lord abides. ||2|| (Siri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, Ang 472).
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