

Female Menstruation Clouded By Religious Constructs: A Case of Purig and Balti Tribe of Kargil, Jammu & Kashmir

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Introduction

Menarche and menstruation are part of a growing up female's life. As soon as the females attain puberty, one apparent reproductive indicator is menstruation. Young girls at their entry into adolescence have to face menstruation as a monthly and cyclic process. Menarche is the first menstrual cycle, or first menstrual bleeding, in female humans. From both social and medical perspectives, it is often considered the central event of female puberty, as it signals the possibility of fertility. It is a vital maturational event of puberty in female adolescents; however unlike other pubertal changes that are gradual and continuous, menarche is a distinct event with a sudden onset. It is highly correlated with other pubertal characteristics and is, therefore, referred as a benchmark for sexual maturation (Jee, 2009).

The socio-cultural practices of a society are what makes it unique and what gives it an identity. Different culture treats menarche in different ways. Some cultures visualize menarche as a crucial time in a girl's life and commemorate it in order to greet the girl in to the world of adulthood while other cultures' consider menarche as just an unimportant physical occurrence. Historically, menarche has been celebrated with detailed menarche ritual. Girls' initiation is not only about ceremonies, it is the whole time of puberty turning from girl into woman. There are few cultures where first blood is a cause for joy and womanhood a source of pride. There, girls receive presents and the whole community meets to feast, dance and celebrate new women in their tribe. However, not all the rituals were positive in nature. Among a Turkish tribe a girl would get a slap from her mother or any other woman who is present at the time the girl starts menstruating. The slap has been interpreted in different ways varying from a punishment due to menstruation; or a means of bringing blood and color back to the cheeks (Culpepper, 1991; Kissling, 1996; Milow, 1983).

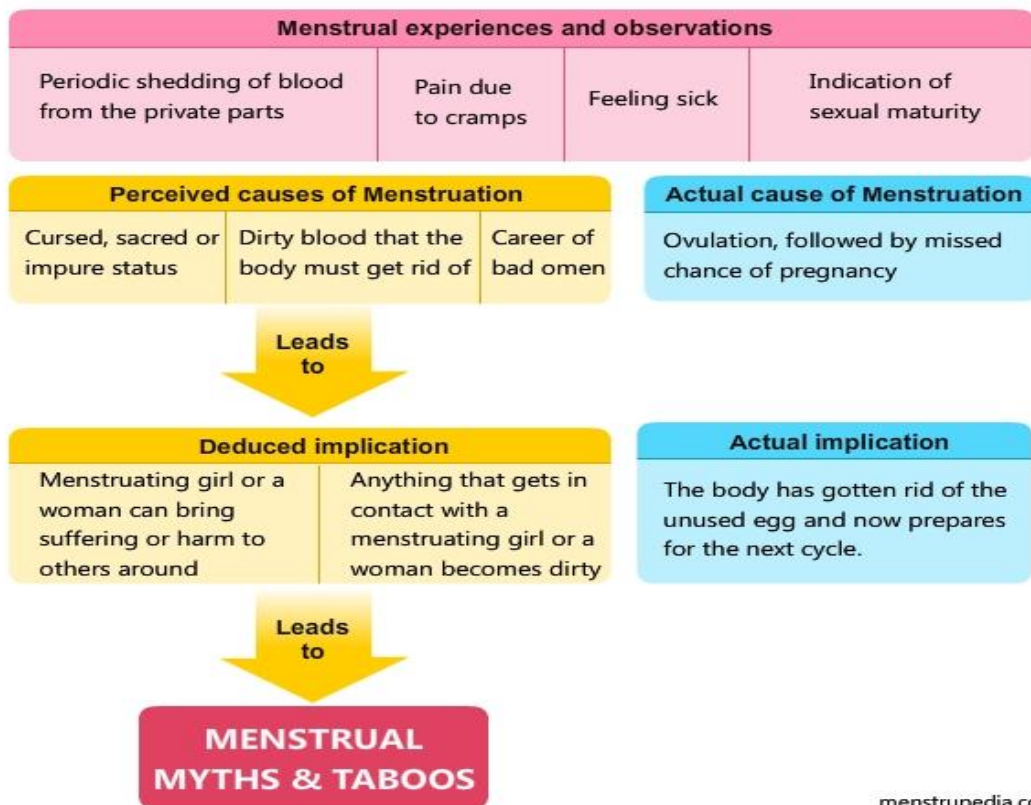
Most menstrual myths and taboos are derived from cultural and religious credentials and hence create anxiousness among females. Many communities world over have gone through centuries of myths and taboos that have created a thought of the female body which has continued to organise the lives of women and girls in modern society and this stems from the fact that it is not looked at as a natural occurrence but a socially constructed one. Religious teachings, cultural beliefs and traditional practices, have all played their role in the philosophy of stigmatizing the menstruating woman (UNICEF, Kenya, 2008). Social and cultural factors influence the adjustment to menstruation and have an effect on the early menarcheal experience (Swenson and Haven, 1987). Ten (2007); Kumar & Srivastava (2011) reported that when women and girls are menstruating their mobility and behaviour are restricted or controlled, due to myths, misconceptions, superstitions and cultural and/or religious taboos. The myths and taboos make the menstrual experience worse for girls and they tend to lose their self esteem further, limiting their full participation in educative, cultural and religious activities (Devkota, 2011).

Historically, menstruation has, and continues to be used as justification for preventing girls and women from fully participating in public life, justifying control over their activities in the public arena in general and over their sexuality

in particular. The view that monthly bleeding is a biological defect or a divine curse renders itself appropriately to a social system in which men control women's behaviour in a patriarchal regime that often 'subject women's bodies to more control than men's' (Shilling, 1993).

Many women in different parts of the world are treated badly just because she is menstruating and various studies have proved this (House et al. 2012). In Western Nepal, women status is lower than a dog's, because she is menstruating. Menstruation is dirty, and a menstruating girl is a powerful, polluting thing, a thing to be feared and shunned (Oche et al, 2012). Muslims in Malawi believed that women's reproductive blood was very dangerous. In Afghanistan menstruating girls and women are also prevented from sleeping next to other family members. In rural Kenya women on their periods are not even considered fit to go into a goats den or walk near livestock, and are not allowed to eat their meat or drink their milk (SOS, 2014). A recent study conducted by Diksha (2014) reported that majority of women themselves believe that a menstruating woman in India is impure and can contaminate anything she touches. It was important to note that most of the people interviewed were not from villages, but urban Indian cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata, Bangalore and Hyderabad. All these reproductive-bleeding events had to be cleansed by ritual bathing before a woman could safely resume full social and spiritual life (Zulu, 2001).

ORIGIN OF MENSTRUAL MYTHS AND TABOOS



Keeping all the aforementioned data in mind, the current account endeavours to study some of the common menstrual beliefs and taboos faced by the females of Purig and Balti tribe of Kargil. Ladakh is divided into two main districts Leh and Kargil. Kargil District is situated at a distance of 205 Kms from Srinagar and 230 Kms from Leh. Kargil district comprises of nine blocks namely Sankoo, Chiktan, Shargol, Tesuru, G.M Pure, Zanskar, Drass, and Kargil. Presently there are around 157 villages in Kargil, out of which only 97 villages are electrified. The population of the district stands around 1, 23,000 of which 99% belong to Scheduled Tribe (Tourism department, Kargil). The main tribes in the area include Brogpas, Baltis, Purig, Shinas and Bodh (kargil.gov.in, 2010).

Menstruation among Purig and Balti tribe of Kargil is masked/marred by a number of religious belief, myths and taboos. A sample of 320 adolescent girls and 100 mothers described the various religious taboos and restrictions they faced during their monthly menstrual cycle.

Religious Taboos / Restrictions Related to Menstruation

Purig and Balti tribe from which the sample was selected are followers of Islam; hence all sample females are Muslim by religion. These females are further found to diligently follow Islamic rules and regulation during menstruation. Likewise other Muslim dominated parts of the world, Muslim females of Kargil District too followed some taboo or restriction. As per observations of Islamic laws these menstruating women are seen as unclean and polluted. A study conducted in Kenya by UNICEF (2008) reported that in Islam, a menstruating woman is considered vulnerable and polluted; therefore she could not pray, fast, or have sexual intercourse. Menstrual blood was najis (polluted), haram (very dirty), just as is the case of all other forms of blood, excrement, and reproductive fluids. In some Islamic traditions the jinn (evil spirit) is believed to be strongly attracted to menstrual blood. For these believers, anyone who sees or touches menstrual blood is ritually impure and vulnerable to malevolent spirits, and dire consequences are bound to occur. Blanchet (1987) had also reported that in Bangladesh, menstrual blood is seen as the greatest of all pollution. Menstruating women must stay inside as much as possible; they are not allowed to prepare food or to work in the rice fields. Sex (and sharing a bed with their partner) and praying or reading the Quran are prohibited during this period. Pednekar (2010) also found that in India menstruating Muslim women in the most conservative of families are restricted from praying, touching the Quran, and must take a holy bath on the seventh day to purify their body.

The specific religious taboos faced by the Purig and Balti women of Kargil include

1. Taboo /restrictions on prayers (Namaz and Quran)
2. Taboo /restrictions on visiting any Holy places (Mosque/Dargha)
3. Taboo /restrictions on observance of Roza during Ramadan
4. Taboo or restrictions on sexual activities during menstruation

Taboo or Restrictions on Prayers (Nemaz and Quran)

According to sample Muslim respondents of Kargil, the menstruating women were not supposed to offer 5 times prayers (Nemaz), nor they could recite or touch the holy book 'Quran'. These activities were strictly prohibited and hence were followed in earnest. However, some of the females especially the elder ones reported that they could recite the contents of Holy Quran but without touching the verses (Aayat) of Quran. Further, according to them if a menstrual cycle lasts more than 10 days then it will not be considered as haiz (menstruation) but rather will be considered as 'Nafaz' in which one can perform 'Namaz', in fact Namaz becomes compulsory (Wajib).

All these rules and regulation about menstruation were enshrined in their religious book 'Resala' and 'Toffa-ul-Awam' which they followed sincerely. However, the respondents shared that during menstruation; woman is permissible to live in the home as usual and to eat and drink with the family and can even attend any social gathering. In short, she can perform all other acts of social life as an average woman. She can also continue to wear clothes that she wore during menstruation as long as there is no blood stain on them. Oche et al (2012) also noted found that menstruating women are not allowed to read the Arab Quran but can read from the translations in other languages.

Taboo / Restrictions on Visiting any Holy Places (Masjid, Mazar and Imam Bada)

Females of Kargil reported that they were strictly advised not to enter any Holy place during their monthly cycle. It is even recommended that a menstruating women should keep a distance of 100 meters from the Mosque since according to them menstruating women are 'impure' and 'dirty', it is believed that the shrine or Holy place will also become impure due to her presence. However, during the month of Mohram (Matam) menstruating women can attend Mohram gathering in Imam Bada (community Hall for religious preaching) to listen the 'Khatbas' and 'Hadith' (religious stories) which are delivered by Imam/sheikh/Aagas or Molanies (female religious preachers). But at the same time cannot touch any religious article such as Tabud (imaginary coffin of 'Imam Hussain', the holy profit 'pbuh' grandson);

Zulzana (a horse that display in the rally of moharam), any written or engrave verse of Quran and Alam (Islamic flag) etc. However no restriction is imposed on the presence of menstruating female during Eid -ul-Adha or Eid -ul-Fitr. The practice of not entering the holy places is also commonly seen among Hindu's in India. Menstruating women irrespective of her age is not supposed to enter a temple or touch any religious article or books.

Taboo /Restrictions on Observance of Roza During Ramadan

One of the religious practices surrounding menstruation is the restriction on observance of Roza during the holy month of Ramadan. Menstruating women who have already started observing Roza during Ramadan, and then starts menstruating will have to discontinue the same. If she wants to complete the left over or missed fast then she may fast later during the year to make up these lost days. In general such women are not allowed to offer any prayers during menstruation because of the belief that prayers from an impure person have no outcome or reimbursement. As explained earlier if a period last more than 10 days then it will not be considered as haze (menstruation) it will be considered as nafaz in which one can keep the fast (Roza) in fact Fast becomes compulsory (wajib) by following the same condition at the time of performing Namaz as stated in previous section.

Most of the women further elaborated by saying that "we don't know why menstruation blood is considered as impure and why we can't offer prayers during menstruation but our religious preachers that is, the Sheikh and Aaga and the elders women of our family guided us by saying that it was directed and commanded by our Allah and written in our holy book Quran and religious book Tofa-tul-Awam or Resala and we all have to follow our Allah's command as we believe in Islam".

In order to reinstate her in the religious context or for her to be considered religiously acceptable, two conditions are laid down:

1. Menstrual blood should stops.
2. The woman is obligatory to perform a purifying or spiritual bath called as 'Ghusl'. At the end of her menstrual cycle usually on the 7th day of her period a women by reciting prayers (dua) known as Ghusl -e- haiz and undertakes a 'Ghusl' which also includes washing the entire body, that is from the head to toe. No part of the body should remain dry; the water should touch every parts of the body. If the woman is wearing nail paint during periods it should be removed first before bathing otherwise Ghusul will not be accepted as per Islamic law because nail paint protects the nails to touch water properly. The Resala (Islamic Book) has complete reference to the details of this 'Ghusal -e- Haiz'. This physical purification allows her to resume prayer and fasting. After bathing, she can apply henna to her hands, feet and hair, if she wants. Some of the elder females of tribal communities of Kargil remarked that Islam doesn't believe in physically taxing a menstruating female with fasts and praying. In order to give relief to already weak and vulnerable women, Islam prohibits observance of Roza during the menstrual cycle.

Taboo or Restrictions on Sexual Activities During Menstruation

All the participants claimed that, since they were followers of Islam, sexual intercourse of a wife with her husband is strictly prohibited during her menstrual cycle. However, Islam allowed the man to eat, sit and lead a normal life with his menstruating wife. The only thing he is not allowed to do is to have sexual intercourse with her for seven days (beginning when the bleeding starts). These laws are derived from the Holy Qur'an (2:222). The Qur'an clearly states the reason for this prohibition, which is that menstruation, is adha (a harmful thing). Allah says: "They ask thee concerning women's courses. Say: They are hurt and polluted, so keep away from women in their courses, and do not approach them until they are clean. But when they have purified themselves, ye may approach them in any manner, time, or place ordained for you by Allah. For Allah loves those who turn to Him constantly and He loves those who keep themselves pure and clean." Ayah: 222 Chapter 2 Baqara.... "Your wives are as a tilth unto you; so approach your tilth when or how ye will; but do some good act for your souls beforehand; and fear Allah. And know that ye are to meet Him (in the Hereafter), and give (these) good tidings to those who believe. Verse 223..." The Quran. The respondents further

illustrated that according to their religious belief, if a woman gets involved in sexual intercourse during menstruation and conceives, and then the child will not be accepted as legitimate child in the society as per religion. A menstruating woman hence again is visualized as unclean and polluted, so distance from her has to be maintained by her husband.

Islam acknowledges the other harmful effects, for women as well as men: "Say: It is an adha (a harmful thing for a husband to have a sexual intercourse with his wife while she is having her menses), so let women alone at such time and go not in unto them till they are cleansed." (Al-Baqarah: 222).

Conclusion

An analysis into the findings of the present study highlight that even though menstruation is an important physiological process that all healthy females undergo in their life time, yet even today it is governed by many religious ethics. Females of Purig and Balti tribe of Kargil visualize menstruation as a phenomenon determined by religious constructs. Islam has a profound role to play in constructing concepts related to menstruation. The two religious books namely 'Resala' and 'Tofa-ul-Awam'; have reference to many prohibition related to religious activities by menstruating women. Both religiously as well as culturally, menstruation is seeing as unclean and impure and a menstruating female is considered polluted. In view of this conceptualization such female is prohibited from touching the Holy Quran, entering the shrine/dargha and also restricted from observing Roza's. Further a menstruating married women is also forbidden from having any sexual relation with her husband, as it is a religious sin and unacceptable. A menstruating female can however, become pure only after the holy bath and hence can resume with any religious activity henceforth.

Even the young adolescent girls receiving education continue to follow these religious practices. The basic assumptions behind these restrictions and taboos have long been forgotten and replaced by unquestionable faith and allegiance. Divergence on these constructs is not permitted because then it is seen as a symbol of defiance to the local culture. Though some of the age old practices have been discarded by the youngsters of the current generation yet most of these continue to be prevalent. All this indicates that among the selected tribal group today also menstruation continues to be clouded by many strict taboos and restrictions which have a direct or indirect religious reference. A woman's personal reproductive matter is seen in relation to its religious interpretation. Females themselves have ceased to consider it as a personal phenomenon but rather their perceptions are marked by its religious context.

Women in their process of empowerment need to redefine and relook at menstruation as a personal reproductive process. Every thing that is socially or religious constructed about menstruation need not be accepted blindly without verification. There is a need to forego those practices which have lost their relevance in the modern times and those which have be followed need to be understood in context of their utility and efficacy. No amount of empowerment is complete without women having a control on their bodies.

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