

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Taboos Regarding Menstruation: General Perception of Women in Delhi

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Abstract:

The paper deals with customs and myths followed by women in our country during their menstrual phase. To gain an insight into this everlasting predicament, there were two surveys conducted, first, to study the experience and taboos faced by women during the phase of menstruation and second, to carry out an analysis of general perceptions and awareness about menstruation in educated women through a questionnaire. Survey results indicated the fact that although a large chunk of population still follows these customs, education has played a pivotal role in its removal from our society. People don't want their daughters to fall victim to these traditions. Better education and open-mindedness are essential to counter existing proscriptions.

Keywords: *taboo, customs, menarche, menstruation, education*

1. Introduction

In countries like India, it is tough to challenge taboos followed during menstruation. There are multiple customs attached to it, various practices that are followed without being questioned, and an extreme lack of awareness exists. The seriousness and the secrecy surrounding this topic set alarm bells ringing. At least 23 percent of girls in India leave school when they start menstruating and the rest miss on an average five days during each monthly menstrual period between the ages of 12 and 18^[1]. Mothers, educated or otherwise, generally indoctrinate their daughters about menstruation portraying it as a curse and that they cannot do away with it. Following silently what one is told has a negative impact on the dignity of the girl child; especially in rural areas where these situations are worse.

To gain an insight into this everlasting predicament, there were two surveys conducted. Interviewed females were of age between 18 and 70. First survey was to study the condition, their experience and taboos faced by women during the phase of menstruation. This survey consists of 45 females in remote underdeveloped regions of Munirka, South Delhi and 45 in well-off regions of Hauz Khas, South Delhi. The second survey was conducted at Connaught Place, Central Delhi to carry out an analysis of general perceptions and awareness about menstruation in educated women through a set of questions. Total number of females interviewed were 128.

2. Survey 1—Customary Proscriptions Faced by Women during Menstruation

Type of restrictions or taboos followed by people varies with region. There are innumerable examples round the world. In Nepal, women are not allowed to interact with anyone during their menses. In rural Ghana, a woman is forbidden to enter a dwelling with a man or cook him food while she is menstruating^[2]. In India, they are not allowed to touch cows. However, there were some common bars faced by females in day to day life in our surveyed region. They are as follows:

- i. Menstruating women have to stay in separate rooms, away from their houses (mainly in remote regions).
- ii. They must rest; they cannot work, take bath or comb their hair.
- iii. They must not cook for others and keep separate utensils; they are not allowed to touch pickles.
- iv. They are not allowed to worship or enter prayer rooms or temples; they can't even keep fasts.
- v. They are not allowed to touch items or cast their shadow on sun.

Women are told that they became polluted/unholy during the period of menstruation. In some regions women are prohibited from using common water bodies. As a result, they are not even provided with water to maintain their hygiene. They must hide the clothes which they use during menses from men. Often in remote regions, women reuse the same cloth, therefore it requires washing. Since they don't let these clothes get dry in open under proper sunlight, they do not get sanitized. It is not just women in remote area who are reserved. Even urban women buy pads and get them wrapped in dark colored plastic bags or newspapers, apparently hesitant to talk about it.

These proscriptions have been traditionally followed till date generation after generation. They were created and initiated by our ancestors when means to maintain hygiene were limited. This might be the reason why in those times women were asked to stay in separate spaces and

not touch food items. However, although it is trivial and impractical to follow these customs or myths, they still dominate our society and is followed by many.

3. Analysis of Survey 2 - General Concerns, Reactions and Perceptions

Our survey at Connaught Place, Central Delhi had basic questions like - "How and when did you come to know about menstruation?", "Did you know about menstruation when you had your first menses?", "Do you follow any customs (taboos) during those days? Is education important for its elimination?", "What advices were given to you? Was your father involved?", "What is your mental state during those days?"

The sample space we had in Connaught Place involved urban, educated and well-to-do people. The most unanticipated observation was that 78 out of 128 ladies interviewed were hesitant and denied giving answers to our questions after being ready initially. On hearing the word 'menstruation', they chose otherwise. This gives a clear picture of the shy and reclusive nature of this topic in the nation, with more than 60% of the women being reluctant to discuss this unrelenting issue. It proves the fact that menstruation is a big 'taboo' in our country even today.

The drawback of the survey was that mostly open-minded people volunteered to take part. The females (50 in number) who agreed to answer to the survey questions, tell us a story, completely different from elsewhere. 76% of them knew about menstruation before they had their first menses. 82% of the surveyed women did not follow any taboos. However, some did admit of not going to temples during this period. 90% of the women agreed that their elders followed these taboos by heart, but they never tried to question them. Not even a single person acknowledged the involvement of their fathers in this subject, be it education or general advices. 52% females are used-to and normal during their periods, while the other 48% are tensed, irritated, aggressive and mentally not prepared for this.

Katherine Dalton says premenstrual tension bedevils every action of a woman. She may be sad, may quarrel, unexpectedly burst into tears, become violent, suffer mood swings etc.^[iii] These reactions create unwanted chaotic situations and may possibly be one of the reasons why there exists a number of myths associated with this subject which are pessimistic in nature.

52% also said that they talked to their elders about the validity of the taboos and myths associated with menstruation. Many of them were hesitant since they thought it wouldn't have an impact or effect their parent's thinking. Except 8% women, nobody wants the coming generations, their daughters, to fall victim to these taboos.

4. Education: Transforming Mentality of Women

It is essential that knowledge about menstruation being imparted to girls be balanced and appropriate. It is a proven fact that girls who are well educated and prepared before menarche are the ones who have positive attitude towards menstruation^{[iv] [v] [vi]}. The survey conducted also proved that it was the mothers who have exercised the responsibility of educating their daughters, the fact being true for all the cases. WSSCC interviewed 775 females and held focus groups with some 12,000 women and girls^[i]. Surprisingly, 90 percent of them didn't know what a menstrual period was before menarche, whereas our survey of educated people proved that 76% of them knew about it. As a result, a majority of these women were prepared for it and did not follow any customs. The role of education can well be understood by this example. It generally happens that girls are explained about menstruation after menarche. Thus their daughters aren't prepared, resulting in hesitancy and anxiety being associated with it^[vii]. Girls feel it is important to talk to them about the process of menstruation and hygienic ways to deal with it. This would give them emotional support and reassurance^[viii]

5. Conclusion

Survey results clearly indicates the fact that education has been playing a pivotal role in removal of these customs from our society. With increase in literacy rates^[ix], the number of people from coming generations, who follow these customs and consider it a taboo, are reducing considerably. Better education and open-mindedness are the key factors. People are still introvert when talked about menstruation, be it urban educated or rural uneducated women. It is important, as also suggested by many in our survey, to include this topic in text books in preliminary stages so that they can be aware of the phenomenon and understand it early. Government and Non-governmental bodies must work to change the scenario by spreading social awareness.

6. References

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