

## Traditional Beliefs and Practices Regarding Menstruation: A Study from Himachal Pradesh

Babita Sharma<sup>1</sup>, Gaurav Gaur<sup>2\*</sup>

### ABSTRACT

Menstruation is a momentous event in any women's life. However, in some areas of Himachal, it is still considered impure and dirty. The discussion about menstruation openly is not considered a welcome step at certain places of Himachal Pradesh. It is considered a matter of shame there; even mothers do not feel comfortable discussing menses with their daughters. The present study is conducted in panchayat Bharech of district Shimla, Himachal Pradesh. The main objectives of the study are to determine the socio-economic conditions, level of awareness about menstruation among rural women, different socio-religious practices women follow during their menstruation. An exploratory study design was used to understand the problem more clearly. The study found that the married women in the villages are still following the practice of seclusion. They are considered untouchable during their menstruation. They are not allowed to touch anything or anybody because they believe that they are impure and impure blood is flushing out in the form of menstruation. The study concluded that the people of Himachal have a deep faith in God, and they link menstruation with impurity. People believe that their local deities will punish them if they do not follow these practices which are followed for ages. After knowing that the topic of research is closely related to the religious sentiments of the rural people all the interventions must be planned in such a way that these sentiments are not hurt and changes are still made.

**Keywords:** Menstruation, women, rural areas, misconceptions, seclusion

### INTRODUCTION

Menstruation is a normal physiological phenomenon that women and adolescent girls experience every month (Sinha, & Paul, 2018). Without it, women can't give birth to a child. Menstruation is a reason for reproduction. It is a normal vaginal flow of blood that occurs as a part of a women's monthly cycle. According to the Merriam-webster dictionary, menstruation is a cyclical discharging of blood, secretions, and tissue debris from the uterus that recurs in non-pregnant breeding-age primate females at approximately monthly intervals and is considered to represent a readjustment of the uterus to the non-pregnant state following proliferative changes accompanying the preceding ovulation (Merriam –Webster dictionary). It is a natural process that usually starts at the age of 10-15 for any female, transgender male, and non-binary persons and lasts for 45-49 years. Every month, 1.8 billion people menstruate across the world, and they are unable to manage menstruation in a dignified and healthy way (UNICEF).

According to the census 2011 in India, there are more than 31 crore women in the reproductive age group (15-49). But still, menstruation is alleged as impure, dirty, embarrassing and women are reticent to discuss it with friends or family members especially males in India. According to NFHS-IV India has around 355 million menstruating women and girls who face a multilayered barrier to effective Menstruation Hygiene Management due

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<sup>1</sup>Babita Sharma, Research Scholar, Central University of Himachal Pradesh, Dharmshala, India

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Centre for Social Work, Panjab University, Chandigarh, India

\*gaurpu@gmail.com

to various social and economic reasons. Menstruation and menstrual practices still face many social, cultural, and religious restrictions which are a big barrier in the path of menstrual hygiene management (Kaur, Kaur, & Kaur. 2018).

Menstruation has caused a cultural dichotomy between men and women. Although it is a natural process, still, in some parts of India, it is considered unhealthy, dirty, and impure. Menstruating women in some rural areas are still practicing segregation due to the belief that menstrual blood is impure (Joshy et al., 2019). The origin of this myth dates back to the Vedic times and is often been linked to Indra's unlawful death of Vritras. For, it has been declared in the Veda that guilt, of killing a brahmana-murder, appears every month as menstrual flow as women had taken upon themselves a part of Indra's guilt (Garg & Anand, 2015) According to this belief, women have to face different kinds of problems like seclusion, discrimination, and humiliation which leads to stress, nervousness, and fear among them.

The present study is conducted in district Shimla of Himachal Pradesh. Himachal Pradesh is known as “The Land of God” and the people here have great faith in their local deities. In some parts of Himachal Pradesh, people still believe that the menstrual blood is impure and this misconception has given rise to various ill practices related to menstruation. Women are treated untouchable for two to three days every month during their menstruation. They are not allowed to cook for themselves, they cant enter inside the house and even worst they can't touch anything or anybody. They are forced to sleep on an empty floor even in the harsh winters which make women's lives more difficult.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Dasgupta & Sarkar (2008) in their study tried to find out the level of awareness about menstruation among adolescent girls. The study was conducted among 160 school-going girls at Rural Health Unit and Training Centre, West Bengal, India. in the study, authors found that more than one-third of respondents were not aware of menstruation before its onset and 90% of girls were using the old and torn cloth to absorb the flow of blood which leads to the different infections related to sexual and reproductive health. The study concluded that due to lack of awareness about menstruation and non-unavailability of sanitary pads, or safe & hygienic menstrual absorbents, girls were facing various social and religious restrictions which affect their study and gave them less opportunity for development.

Scorgie et al. (2015) in their study “Bitten by Shyness: Menstrual Hygiene Management Sanitation and Quest for Privacy in South Africa” tried to understand how women in low-income countries managed their menstruation. The researchers wanted to find out the women's perception of menstruation and the main objective of the study was to know about menstrual blood absorbent and its management among women. The study was conducted in three sites of Durban, South Africa. Data was collected from 21 women by using the photovoice method which enables them to use their photographic images to tell their stories about their everyday world. The study showed that the participants were imparted with superficial and inadequate information which leads to lots of misconception and nervousness among young girls. Most of the participants were using disposable non-biodegradable sanitary pads, tampons, etc. but there is no provision for the disposal of sanitary napkins because of which dogs and other stray animals can be seen messing up with sanitary waste and littering it all around which creates an uncomfortable sight for the women.

Joshy et al. (2019) in their study “Social Taboos and Menstrual practices in the Pinder Valley” find that menstruating women are still treated impure in the valley. The study’s main objective was to know about the different ill practices faced by women in the valley during their menstruation. The sample of the study was 48 and the survey was conducted in the five-gram panchayats of Pinder valley of Uttarakhand. The study showed that women practice menstrual seclusion. Over 90 percent of women and girls live separately in the cattle shed (goth) along with the cows and buffaloes when they get their periods. The study found that most of the women didn’t use the toilet during their menstruation and were forced to defecate in the open.

The article “78% women were aware of menstrual hygiene” showed that the women of district Hamirpur of Himachal Pradesh used sanitary napkins during their menstruation. The report was prepared by Deputy Commissioner Richa Verma and the survey was conducted among 6000 women in two groups ( Below 18 and Above 18). The article concluded that most of the women in district Hamirpur were well aware of menstrual hygiene and were using sanitary napkins as an absorbent (The Tribune, 2019).

The above literature shows that menstruation is still considered as something which is not normal in society. It has been found from previous studies that various measures have been taken regarding Menstrual Hygiene Management in rural areas but these measures are not sufficient. There is a need to make people aware about menstruation so that they can understand that menstruation is a normal biological process and there is nothing like an impurity in it.

## METHODOLOGY

**Research Design:** The exploratory research design was used in this study to understand the problem more clearly.

### **Objectives:**

1. To understand the level of awareness about menstruation among women from different socio-economic backgrounds.
2. To know the absorbent used by the women and its disposal practices.
3. To understand socio-religious practices followed by women during menstruation.

**Study area:** The study was conducted in the Bharech Panchayat of District Shimla in Himachal Pradesh. Mashobra is a Block placed in Shimla district in Himachal Pradesh.

**Study Participants:** The study was conducted among women between the age of 19-49.

**Sampling size and technique:** Data was collected from 49 participants from three revenue villages (Bharech, Dwaro, and Jangal Bhalawag) of Bharech panchayat. Purposive sampling was used to collect the data.

**Tools Used:** Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used for the data collection. The pre-formed interview schedule was used for data collection. The observation method was another tool used alongside.

## RESULTS

**Table 1. Socio-economic status of Women**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Value</b>	<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Educational Qualification</b>	Below 10 <sup>th</sup>	14	29
	10 <sup>th</sup>	11	22
	12 <sup>th</sup>	8	16
	Graduation	10	20
	Others	6	13
<b>Category</b>	General	27	55
	Sc	22	45
<b>Marital Status</b>	Unmarried	11	22
	Married	36	74
	Widow	1	2
	Divorce	1	2
<b>Nature of the Family</b>	Joint	30	61
	Nuclear	19	39
<b>Occupational Status</b>	Students	7	14
	Farmers	27	55
	Govt. Employees	3	6
	Home Maker	6	12
	Others	6	12
<b>Financial Status</b>	Above Poverty Line	41	84
	Below Poverty Line	8	16

Source: Primary data

The present study is conducted among 49 women in age between 19 to 49 years. The 14% of women are between 19 - 25 years, 24% of women are between 26 - 30 years, 27% of women were between 31 - 35 years, 18% of women are between 36 – 40 years, 14% of women are between 41 - 45 years of age, and only one female is between the ages of 46 – 49.

The data shows that all the women in this study went to school but 8% of respondents didn't even complete their primary education. 20% of respondents studied till the 8th. 22% of women completed their 10th, 16% of respondents passed 12th, 21% of respondents graduated and 12% of respondents had done post-graduation. The women from the general as well as SC category are included in the study. 55% of respondents in the present study are from the general category and 45% are from the SC category. 11 women in the present study are unmarried, 36 women are married, 1 is a widow and one is a divorcee.

61% of women are living in a joint family and 39% are living in a nuclear family. The women from BPL families are also included in this study, 16% of the women lie in the Below Poverty Line.

Most of the respondents from the area have basic educational qualifications. The respondents of the study included women from both upper and lower castes. The marital status of these respondents varied from the unmarried, married, widow, and divorced. Most of the respondents do work on the farms but do not consider themselves as income generators, even after putting in an equal amount of hard work similar to their male counterparts they considered themselves to be just housewives. As they nullify their contribution in the field.

**Table 2: Details Regarding menstruation**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Value</b>	<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Age of menarche</b>	11 – 13 Years	5	10
	14 – 15 Years	32	65
	16-17 Years	10	21
	Above 17 Years	2	4
<b>Are you aware of menstruation before its occurrence</b>	Yes	39	80
	No	10	20
<b>The usual duration of your menstrual cycle</b>	2-3 days	9	18.5
	4-5 days	30	61
	6-7 days	9	18.5
	More than 7 days	1	2
<b>The usual Interval of your menstrual cycle</b>	Less than 22 days	1	2
	23- 28 days	29	59
	29- 35 days	18	37
	More than 35 days	1	2
<b>According to menstruation is</b>	A biological process	23	47
	Impure blood flow	27	51
	Don't know	1	2

The above table shows that 65% of the respondents said that they obtained their menarche at the age of 13-15 years. 12% of women had attained their first period at the age of 15-17, 5% respondents had attained their menarche at 11-13 years, and there were 2 women whose period started after the age of 17. Most of the respondents in the study got their first period around the age of 13-15 but nowadays girls get their period around the age of 11-13 due to good nutrition.

80% of women knew about menstruation before their menstruation started but 20% of women didn't know anything about it before starting their menstruation. Sources of information for most of the respondents were their mothers and sisters. Few respondents said that they get information from their friends and teachers.

34% of the respondents said that felt very embarrassed when they had their first period. 25% of the respondents said they were afraid, 12 % of respondents' reactions were anxious, 4% of respondents got shocked and 14% of the respondents did not find anything unusual as they were well aware of it. On average the menstrual cycle of 61% of the respondents were 4-5 days, 18% of women had a period for 6-7 days, 18% of the respondent's menstrual cycle were 2-3 days, and there was one woman who bled for more than 7 days.

Interval of the menstruation for 59% of the respondents is 23-28 days. 37% of women said that their menstrual interval is 29-35 days and 4% of women told that they get their menstruation after 35 days which shows that there are no such issues regarding menstruation among the women. Pain in the stomach and pain in the back were some common problems faced by women during their menstruation. There are only two women who have oligomenorrhea (when a woman doesn't get her period for 35 days).

**Table 3: Absorbent used by the Women during their menstruation**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Values</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Absorbents used by women</b>	Non-biodegradable Sanitary pads	20	46.9
	Biodegradable sanitary pads	7	14.3
	Cloth	4	8.2
	Both cloth and Sanitary pad	15	30.6
<b>Disposal of the sanitary napkin</b>	Bury	18	40.9
	Burn	19	43.2
	In a dustbin with the regular garbage	2	4.5
	In a separate dustbin	2	4.5
	Throw outside	3	6.8
<b>How often do women change sanitary pads</b>	Every 6 hours	15	30.6
	Every 8 hours	19	38.8
	Every 12 hours	15	30.6

The above data shows that 47% of the respondents say that they use non-biodegradable sanitary pads as an absorbent, 31% of the respondents use both cloth and sanitary pads, 8% of women use only cloth, and 14% of respondents use biodegradable sanitary pads as an absorbent and these biodegradable pad provided by a company.

60% of respondents get sanitary pads from ASHA workers as well as they buy this from the grocery store. 13% of respondents say that they do not use the pas distributed by ASHA because the quality of these sanitary pads is not good and the rest 14% of respondents get sanitary pads from a company that sells biodegradable sanitary pads.

40% of respondents say that they bury their used sanitary pads, 43% of respondents burn the used pads, 7% of respondents throw outside and 9% of respondents throw it in the dustbin with the regular garbage. The study found that practices of sanitary waste disposal are not proper in rural areas. The improper practices of burning and burying the sanitary pads are usually practiced in rural areas and sanitary waste is becoming a common site everywhere polluting the soil and the water resources generally created by dogs' menace.

All women who were using cloth, reuse it after washing it with soap and water and dry cloth outside in the sunlight. There are only 4 women who are not using sanitary pads, all of them said that discomfort is the reason for not using the pad.

39% of respondents said that they change their pad/cloth every 8 hours during their period, 31% of respondents change their absorbent after 12 hours, and 30% of respondents say that they change their pad/cloth every 6 hours. When asked about the tampon and menstrual cup, 33% of women say that yes they heard out these but they do not use these. 67% of women do not have any idea about these absorbents.

### **Restrictions Imposed on Women During Menstruation**

From the responses, we find that all the respondents have a toilet in their house. 27% of respondents say that they are not allowed to use the toilet during their menstruation they have to go outside for defecation where 73% of respondents are allowed to use the toilet during their period. 69% of respondents take baths daily during their menstruation. 8% of

respondents say that they take baths twice during their periods, 23% of respondents are those who take baths on the third day of their menstruation.

43% of respondents say that they sleep on an empty floor of their room, 16% of women sleep in Varanda, 12% of women used to sleep in a storeroom, and 29% of respondents which mostly include unmarried girls sleep in their bedroom on their bed.

76% of women have to face social restrictions like to touch anybody, to touch anything, to go inside the house, to cook food, to attend any social function. They are not allowed to do the above mention things, but they have to do their other daily chores like collecting livestock, working in fields, etc as she does on other days where 24% of the respondents do not face any such social restriction.

96% of the respondents are restricted to conducting pooja/prayers and to attending any religious function during their menstruation and 90% of the respondents are not allowed to enter the prayer room. 94% of the respondents are not allowed to touch sacred religious books.

### **Perception of Women Regarding These Restrictions**

55% of respondents say that they do not support the above mention social restriction whereas 45% of respondents are in favor of these restrictions, they say we live in rural society and it is our duty to follow these restrictions.

When asked about the religious restrictions 78% of the respondents are in favor of the religious restriction, they say that they do not go to religious places because it will harm them and their families where 22% of respondents are not in favor of these religious restrictions but they are following these rules because of the fear of local deities.

55% of the respondents believe that if they do not follow these restrictions, they will have to face the wrath of the deities in the form of unhealthy lifestyle and mental and physical suffering where 35% of respondents deem it to be a myth only and the rest 8% of respondents have no opinion on this matter.

73% of the respondents say that when they accidentally do something that is prohibited during menstruation, they tend to get nightmares and their health deteriorates too.

90% of respondents asserted that they keep money on the name of their deities (*Devte ke Nam pr Irupya rakhte hai*) as a penalty if they accidentally do something that is prohibited during menstruation whereas 10% of respondents do not know anything in this context.

### **FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS**

In the present study, we find that more than 50% of the respondents believed that the menstrual blood is impure which showed the lack of correct information amongst the respondents. They think that impurities in their body are flushed out during their menstruation and due to this belief women have to face various social and religious discrimination.

The present study found that 71% of the respondents have been using non-biodegradable sanitary napkins as an absorbent in this geographical area, it is the same highlighted in a study undertaken by Yaliwal. G.R., et al. (2020)<sup>2</sup> in North Karnataka, also stated that 72%

of the rural girls were using commercial sanitary pads as an absorbent. It was also found that the majority of these women got access to pads through government initiatives, before this initiative they were using cloth only because of limited resources women in rural areas do not get to buy sanitary pads on regular basis nor are they comfortable asking the male family member to get them the pads from the market.

The women have been facing and abiding by multiple social and religious discrimination. The study found that keeping unmarried respondents aside the majority of other respondents have been facing various social restrictions like they are not allowed inside the house, do not attend any social function, or even do not touch anything and anybody during their menstruation. The majority of women have to sleep **“on the floor”** in some separate room with bare minimum bedding. This study has been conducted in district Shimla of Himachal Pradesh, which faces heavy snowfall in winter and the temperature drops to minus degrees Celcius. In this severe cold women have to stay outside from their house and are forced to sleep on the floor with minimum bedding during their menstruation which indicates the deprivation of basic Human Rights of women. It has also been found in the study that 45% of the respondents are in favor of the above social restrictions, which is really very surprising. They believed that these restrictions are made for their benefits while 55% of the respondents do not support the social restrictions imposed on them, they are following these restrictions simply because they are afraid that they will be punished by their local deities if they do not follow these social restrictions. The same results were found in the study conducted by Joshy. et.al., (2019)<sup>4</sup> where women said if they are not observing these social taboos they would invite the wrath of the Gods.

In the context of religious restrictions, 96% of all respondents have been facing religious discrimination during their menstruation. They are not allowed to touch any religious book, they do not enter into the Pooja room and they are not allowed to visit a temple and to perform prayers. When talking about these restrictions it was found that 78% of the respondents are in favor of religious restrictions. They believed these practices are going on from the time of their ancestors and they have to follow them.

## LIMITATIONS

There are some limitations of the study, which are given below:

- The data was collected from the female-only, hence the male perspective about menstruation and its related practices is missing in the paper.
- The study focused on only one gram panchayat, so we can not generalize its results to a larger context.

## CONCLUSION

Menstruation is a natural phenomenon but due to the absence of correct information about menstruation and menstrual blood, women have to face various social and religious discrimination. Menstrual blood is considered dirty, impure & unhealthy, due to this misbelief, many misconceptions have arisen. Tremendous work is being done by the government and non-government organizations to improve the condition of women during menstruation. The Government had taken several initiatives to provide safe and healthy sanitary products so that women can manage their period in a safe and dignified manner but still there is a need to do a lot. (a lot that can be done) Merely providing sanitary pads free of cost or at a minimal rate will not help women manage their periods, but there is a need to educate them about the proper usage of sanitary pads and how to dispose of them. There is a dying need to educate both females and males about menstruation. Because unless people



know the actual cause of menstruation, they will create their illusions which will give rise to various ill practices and there would be no changes in existing practices.

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