

# Understanding and Debunking Menstrual Taboos in India: On the Importance of Education and Activism

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In American pop culture, it is common for coming of age stories to include bodily changes and functions as milestones for maturity and one's entrance into adulthood. As this relates to the female body, menstruation and one's first period are portrayed in pop culture in many different ways. Sometimes a first period is a source of horror and confusion, like in the 1976 movie *Carrie*, or as embarrassing and comedic, like in Netflix's *Big Mouth*. These representations occasionally give contradictory statements on beliefs about menstruation in the U.S., but the important thing to note is that discussion around menstruation is normalized. Feminine hygiene products are widely available at many stores and in public restrooms, and many school health classes feature entire units on puberty and menstruation. For many women in the western world menstruation, is just part of daily life, but for women who live in India, menstruation can disrupt their entire lives over the course of the menstrual cycle. There are many taboos surrounding menstruation in India, and these taboos prevent women from following their normal routines. It is even taboo to discuss menstruation because "to do so may bring shame," which further leads to a lack of information and understanding.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, this lack of information then creates lack of proper menstrual hygiene, which has a lasting physical and mental impact on girls and women.<sup>2</sup> In order to combat this issue, social stigma surrounding this natural bodily occurrence must end through education, advocacy, and activism.

To gain a better understanding of how menstrual taboos affect girls and women, one must first understand the origins of these taboos. Many of the beliefs related to menstruation are deeply rooted in culture, myths, and religion. One of the myths that spawned incorrect beliefs about menstruation comes from Vedism, an early form of Hinduism, and

1. Linda Mason, et al, "We Do Not Know": A Qualitative Study Exploring Boys Perceptions of Menstruation in India," in *Reproductive Health* 14, no. 1 (2017), 175.

2. Linda Mason, et al, "We Do Not Know," 176.

tells the story of Indra, the "King of the Highest Heaven," and how he slayed a serpent named Vritra. Indra was overcome with guilt for his actions and mortal women took some of that guilt upon themselves, which manifested itself in the form of monthly bleeding.<sup>3</sup> The monthly bleeding and its association with guilt led many people to believe that menstruating women were dirty or impure, and although many people may not remember the ancient association of guilt with blood and the story of Indra's slaying of Vritra, the idea that menstruating women are impure remains.<sup>4</sup> This perceived impurity or filth often prevents women from participating in many aspects of daily life, including preparing food or simply entering the kitchen, offering prayers or touching holy books, and participating in physical activity, because it is believed that their impurity will spread.<sup>5</sup> Many school-aged girls do not attend class while they are menstruating and some even drop out of school altogether after their first period. When women are not able to participate in normal activities during menstruation, it prevents them from completing necessary tasks that allow them to be functioning members of society and of their families. It is said that women must be "purified" before they return to their families and normal life,<sup>6</sup> but ultimately, the taboos that surround menstruation and the idea that women are dirty or impure are far reaching.<sup>6</sup> These ideas can further permeate a woman's whole life and potentially cause her to believe that she is not worthy of a happy and healthy life, or even basic human rights and treatment as an equal in society. These ideas can have long lasting consequences not only on a woman's physical health, but on mental health and development as well.

One of the most damaging effects of the menstrual taboos in India is how they physically impact women and their health. In general, the cultural associations of menstruation and impurity are often compounded by their obvious relation to the female reproductive system and the lack of discussion and education available on these topics. For instance, according to a 2017 study, only 38.8% of school aged girls surveyed knew that the uterus was the source of menstrual blood.<sup>7</sup> This lack of reproductive health education and general

3. Garg Suneela and Tanu Anand, "Menstruation Related Myths in India: Strategies for Combating It" in *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care* Vol 4, no. 2 (2015), 184.

4. Suneela and Anand, "Menstruation Related Myths in India," 184.

5. Suneela and Anand, "Menstruation Related Myths in India," 185.

6. Suneela and Anand, "Menstruation Related Myths in India," 184.

7. Prakash, Mathiyalagen, et al, "A Descriptive Cross-Sectional Study on Menstrual Hygiene and Perceived Reproductive Morbidity Among Adolescent Girls in a Union Territory, India," in *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care* 6, no. 2 (2017), 362.

lack of discussion can have serious consequences on women's reproductive health that takes perceived impurity and causes actual unhygienic practices. One of the most common issues is that without education at school or discussion at home, many girls do not know how to maintain cleanliness with the use of sanitary products when they begin their first period. Out of all women of menstruating age, it is estimated that 77% of them use cloth rags as their primary form of menstrual hygiene products and of those women, nearly 88% said they use "ashes, newspapers, dried leaves, and husk sand," to aid absorption.<sup>8</sup> The use of non-disposable hygiene products is due partially to income disparity in India and the fact that not all women and their families can afford these products. Products that are non-disposable are more difficult to clean or change than disposable ones, but even women who use disposable products often lack access to adequate restroom or washroom facilities in which to fully address their hygiene needs.<sup>9</sup> It is also interesting to note that one of the restrictions that many girls face while menstruating is that they cannot touch water or bathe, because of the belief that they will taint the water and make it impure as well.<sup>10</sup> These beliefs have no evidence to support them, but still they persist, especially among the less educated members of society. When menstruating girls and women are unable to maintain personal hygiene and practice cleanliness, it can often cause reproductive tract infections. The study from 2017 also showed that 88.4% of school aged girls reported some sort of reproductive tract issue related to their period, including "abdominal and lower back pain, discharge, itching, and difficulty in micturition," yet only 37.4% sought some sort of treatment and even fewer of those actually received treatment.<sup>11</sup> The low numbers of women who receive treatment for their menstruation related physical issues shows that their symptoms are not taken seriously by family members and even health professionals. Essentially, menstruating women in India are treated almost like they have some sort of plague and they are reduced to outcasts, even while they are in their own homes.

The unfair treatment of women who are menstruating combined with poor physical hygiene and lack of medical treatment can also have lasting effects on a woman's mental health and self-esteem. One of the most prevalent ways that girls' self-esteem is affected by menstrual taboos and culture is through bullying and harassment by peers. Even though the results of one study completed in 2017 claimed that many of the school-aged boys surveyed denied that menstruating girls were teased, there is still "a large body of international literature suggesting that girls suffer humiliation from being teased."<sup>12</sup>

8. Suneela and Anand, "Menstruation Related Myths in India," 185.

9. Prakash, Mathiyalagen, et al, "Cross-Sectional Study on Menstrual Hygiene," 363.

10. Suneel and Anand, "Menstruation Related Myths in India," 185.

11. Prakash, Mathiyalagen, et al, "Cross-Sectional Study on Menstrual Hygiene," 365.

12. Linda Mason, et al, "We Do Not Know," 181.

Teasing by peers, especially during a young age, creates a culture in which girls are alienated from the majority and feel like they do not belong. This lost sense of belonging can have further consequences on girls' relationships with others, and especially with male peers. Many young male students in the study by Linda Mason said they noticed that their female friends acted and were treated differently when they were menstruating. One participant in the study even said, "[They] behave different. [They] don't come close to us. If anyone goes close to her, she denies them."<sup>13</sup> This statement shows that boys are affected by menstrual taboos as well, and that they also feel the consequences of their culture despite the fact that many of the practices in place are meant to separate them from it. Other comments made by participants in the study suggests that the boys often felt they "had lost girls valued friendships," which not only harms the girls, but it also harms the boys.<sup>14</sup> This denial of friendship creates a further gender disparity within the culture, because it creates separate spheres for men and women, where they are unable to discuss their issues and find solutions together. If the physical and mental health issues caused by menstrual taboos are to be overcome in India, there must not be a separation of issues by gender, but instead, everyone must work together to change the culture.

Overcoming menstrual taboos and changing the culture in India in a way that best benefits not only women, but society as a whole, is a multi-step process that includes education and activism at the core of the movement. The best way to increase awareness and change the culture is through reproductive and menstrual education for all school aged students. In many instances, some students have never been exposed to comprehensive health education and therefore have never had an opportunity to discuss basic health issues. Furthermore, in most of the schools in India that offer health classes, the regular school teachers lead these classes, but it is suggested that "health education [...] may be best taught by those trained specifically for that purpose."<sup>15</sup> When highly trained health education professionals are brought into schools to teach health classes, it is more likely that they will give students factual information instead of information based on their own biases or beliefs. These professionals would be better suited to discuss menstruation and menstrual hygiene,

13. Mason, et al, "We Do Not Know," 180.

14. Mason, et al, "We Do Now Know," 174.

15. Mason, et al, "We Do Now Know," 181.

researchers estimate the feminine hygiene market in India will reach \$1.5 billion by 2020.<sup>23</sup> Not only is the industry growing, but much of the growth is occurring with small, local manufacturers who focus on the development and distribution of affordable sanitary products in rural regions, where feminine hygiene awareness is the worst.<sup>24</sup> When feminine hygiene products are created locally, they are not only more affordable to people with economic constraints, but those manufacturers also create jobs which raise the income levels of the surrounding area and make hygiene products even more attainable. Leaders like SheSays and small manufacturers are on the front of initiating change and empowering women in India by helping women find their voices and giving them buying power by making affordable sanitary pads more accessible. As women in India become more empowered to change the culture surrounding menstruation, they not only increase their physical and mental health, but they increase their social standing as well.

The social stigma surrounding menstruation in India is deeply ingrained in culture and myth, but that does not mean that that cannot change. Many girls and women have struggled for years with menstruation and the various burdens that come along with it, but now women are taking to social media to raise awareness on the issue and advocate for change. Many people agree that there needs to be more education on the issue and with the education there will be more conversation, which will actively make the topic of menstruation easier to talk about. If we compare the stigma to a literal bloodstain, it may be difficult to remove, but it is not impossible. It may take a little internet consulting, a few phone calls to wise grandmothers, and a little hard work, but that stain can be removed. If everyone works together to actively change the culture, starting with themselves, then the mental and physical health of women will improve, and they will gain more equality and autonomy within Indian society.

23. Svetlana Uduslivaia, "India's Disposable Hygiene Marketplace: Opportunities and Challenges," in *Nonwovens Industry* 47, no. 10 (2016), 29.

24. Uduslivaia, "India's Disposable Hygiene Marketplace," 30.

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