

Impurity Flowing Through Menstrual Blood; Narratives of Menstrual Beliefs and Superstitions among Adolescent Girls in Rural Punjab

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Abstract: *Menstruation, a natural biological phenomenon experienced by adolescent girls, is often accompanied by a myriad of cultural beliefs and superstitions across different societies. These beliefs, deeply ingrained in cultural norms and traditions, influence the behaviours and practices surrounding menstruation, shaping the experiences of young girls as they navigate through this transformative phase of life. In the diverse socio-cultural landscape of Fazilka district, Punjab, such superstitions manifest in various forms, impacting the daily lives and well-being of adolescent girls. This research paper endeavours to delve into the intricate web of superstitions surrounding menstruation among adolescent girls in the Fazilka district, with the overarching objective of documenting and understanding these practices. Through quantitative research methods the study aims to explore the origins, prevalence, and implications of these superstitions within the local context. By uncovering these complexities, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how cultural beliefs shape perceptions and behaviours related to menstruation, ultimately informing interventions and policies aimed at promoting the well-being and empowerment of adolescent girls. The anticipated findings of this research are expected to provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of adolescent girls in the Fazilka district, shedding light on the pervasive influence of superstitions on their physical, emotional, and social dimensions of health.*

Keywords: Menstrual beliefs, menstrual superstitions, impurity, menstrual taboos, menstrual perceptions and practices

1. Introduction

Menstrual beliefs and taboos constitute an integral part of women lived experiences across cultures. From a very young age, girls are socialised into a set of so-called “**menstrual etiquettes**”; normative rules and restrictions that they are expected to follow throughout their lives. These socially constructed norms significantly shape and influence women’s overall experiences of menstruation, often framing it as something impure, secretive, or shameful rather than a natural biological process. Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that such deeply ingrained beliefs and taboos adversely affect adolescents’ experiences, especially the time of menarche. In many cases, inadequate prior knowledge combined with fear-laden cultural narratives results in menstruation being experienced as distressing, frightening, and traumatic. Consequently, menarche; rather than being understood as a normal developmental milestone; frequently becomes associated with anxiety, shock, confusion, and psychological discomfort (Behera et al., 2015; Gold-Watts et al., 2020; Kaur & Vats, 2020; McCammon et al., 2020; Muralidharan, 2019). In sociological terms, the term “**taboo**” refers to an activity, practice, or social ritual that is prohibited or restricted within a society due to religious beliefs, cultural norms, or moral judgements, and whose violation is considered socially unacceptable or sanctionable (Kaundal & Thakur, 2014). Menstrual taboo represents one such deeply entrenched form of social prohibition, rooted in multiple cultural, religious, and symbolic meanings attached to menstruation. Across societies, various activities and practices acquire taboo status depending on their cultural significance and normative frameworks. Among these, open discussion about menstruation itself remains one of the most pervasive menstrual taboos. Despite variations in socio-economic development, silence and secrecy surrounding menstruation persist, (Das et al., 2015; Kaundal & Thakur,

2014; Mason et al., 2013), across developed, developing, and underdeveloped societies, reflecting the universal yet culturally mediated nature of menstrual stigma. Another widely prevalent belief associated with this natural biological process is the notion of impurity, wherein menstrual blood is commonly perceived as unclean, polluting, and even dangerous. Many instances may be found in the field of sociological community studies, where intellectuals have linked the concept of impurity to the feminine gender, particularly her menstrual blood. Douglas’s ‘Purity and Danger’ investigates the link between impurity and the feminine gender, notably menstrual blood. She claims that “coming into contact with menstrual blood is dangerous”, describing it as dirty and harmful. Because of how seriously this belief is held, men, in particular, are forbidden from interacting with women who are menstruating during important events. Douglas uses the term ‘matter out of place’ to convey the impression that menstrual blood is unclean, contaminated, ugly, and polluted. She does, however, also draw attention to the metaphorical significance of water in religious contexts, highlighting its capacity for healing and purification (Douglas, 2002). The present research paper further examines and discusses a range of such menstrual beliefs and taboos as articulated by adolescent girls, drawing on primary data collected through fieldwork.

Objectives

- 1) To explore the menstrual experiences of adolescent girls in terms of menstrual superstitions and taboos.
- 2) To analyse the impact of these superstitions on overall menstrual experience of adolescent girls.

2. Research Methodology

The study was conducted in Fazilka district of Punjab, where data were collected from 300 adolescent girls belonging to the

12–18 years age group. Participants were drawn from ten villages through the snowball sampling method. Data collection was carried out using a structured interview schedule, ensuring uniformity and consistency in responses.

3. Results

Table 1: Menstrual Restriction/ Prohibitions followed by Adolescent Girls

| Restriction | Yes (%) | No (%) |
|---|--------------|--------------|
| Not allowed to play | 54 (18.0 %) | 246 (82.0 %) |
| Not allowed to cook | 13 (4.3 %) | 287 (95.7 %) |
| Not allowed to entry in religious corner of house or temple | 229 (76.3 %) | 71 (23.7 %) |
| Not allowed to enter in the Kitchen | 20 (6.7 %) | 280 (93.3 %) |
| Not allowed to touch Plants (Tulsi; Rose, etc) | 234 (78.0 %) | 66 (22.0 %) |
| Not allowed to touch Pickle | 264 (88.0 %) | 36 (12.0 %) |
| Not allowed to look into mirror | 167 (55.7 %) | 133 (44.3 %) |
| Not allowed to wash hair | 189 (63.0 %) | 111 (37.0 %) |
| Not allowed to dry menstrual cloth or garments openly | 276 (92.0 %) | 24 (8.0 %) |

Source: Primary Data collected by Author

Table 1 presents the prevalent menstrual prohibitions followed by adolescent girls, which are largely learned from

mothers and grandmothers and transmitted across generations. The most commonly reported restriction is the prohibition on touching pickles, with 88 per cent of the respondents adhering to this taboo, while only 12 per cent reported facing no such restriction. Restrictions related to religious practices and household spaces were also widely observed. A total of 229 respondents reported being prohibited from entering the religious corner of the house or temples, and 78 per cent of the girls stated that they were not allowed to touch plants during menstruation. Certain prohibitions were found to be less strictly enforced, such as restrictions on playing outside the house (reported by 54 girls) and cooking food (reported by only 13 respondents). However, several taboos were identified that directly interfere with daily life activities and negatively affect menstrual and reproductive hygiene. Notably, 276 girls (92 per cent) reported being prohibited from drying menstrual cloths or garments openly in sunlight, a practice that is otherwise essential for killing germs and maintaining hygiene. Additionally, 189 respondents stated that they were not permitted to wash their hair during menstruation, while more than half of the participants (167 girls) reported restrictions on looking into a mirror during their menstrual period.

These prohibitions are deeply rooted in culturally embedded beliefs, which are elaborated in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Menstruation related beliefs among Adolescent Girls

| Beliefs | Yes (%) | No (%) | No Idea (%) |
|---|--------------|--------------|-------------|
| Girls' entry to any place contaminate environment during menstruation | 189 (63.0 %) | 106 (35.3 %) | 5 (1.7 %) |
| Your touch can rotten the pickle, and plants during your periods | 209 (69.7 %) | 84 (28.0 %) | 7 (2.3 %) |
| A menstrual period makes a girl ashamed of herself | 134 (44.7 %) | 166 (55.3 %) | 0 |
| Washing hair during menstrual periods stops bleeding | 102 (34.0 %) | 187 (62.3 %) | 11 (3.7 %) |
| Girl is impure during her menstruation | 178 (59.3 %) | 110 (36.7 %) | 12 (4.0 %) |
| After taking a thorough bath, including washing her hair at the end of the menstrual cycle, a girl is considered pure | 290 (96.7 %) | 10 (3.3 %) | 0 |

Source: Primary Data collected by Author

Table 2 illustrates the menstruation-related beliefs prevalent among adolescent girls. A substantial proportion of the respondents (69.7 per cent; $n = 209$) believed that their touch could spoil pickles and harm plants during menstruation, reflecting deep-rooted notions of contamination associated with the menstrual body. Beliefs related to impurity were also widespread. More than half of the respondents (59.3 per cent; $n = 178$) perceived themselves as impure during their menstrual period, while 36.7 per cent rejected this notion. Correspondingly, an overwhelming majority (96.7 per cent; $n = 290$) believed that ritual purity is restored only after taking a thorough bath, including washing the hair, at the end of the menstrual cycle, indicating the persistence of purification rituals. Certain beliefs reflected misconceptions related to bodily processes and health practices. About 34 per cent ($n = 102$) of the girls believed that washing hair during menstruation could stop menstrual bleeding, whereas 62.3 per cent did not subscribe to this belief. Notably, 63 per cent of the respondents ($n = 189$) believed that a girl's entry into certain spaces during menstruation could contaminate the environment, reinforcing restrictions on mobility and participation in everyday social and domestic activities. Overall, the findings reveal that menstrual beliefs among adolescent girls remain strongly influenced by cultural notions of purity, pollution, and shame, which continue to shape their perceptions and practices related to menstruation.

4. Discussion

The results presented in the above table highlight the widespread prevalence of menstrual restrictions, taboos, and superstitions among adolescent girls. These beliefs not only reinforce the notion of impurity associated with menstruation, a natural biological process, but also compel adolescents to adhere to prescribed practices aimed at restoring ritual purity. The data shows how 290 girls believe that purity can be retained by taking thorough bath along with washing hair. The persistence of such beliefs can largely be attributed to a lack of awareness and access to accurate information regarding menstruation. Within the Indian socio-cultural milieu, menstruation is often discussed in hushed or euphemistic terms and is frequently treated as a topic to be concealed rather than openly addressed (Kewlani & Saharan, 2025). Consequently, open communication about menstruation is limited even within familial spaces, including between mothers and daughters. This pervasive silence and discomfort underscore how menstruation continues to be regarded as a sensitive and taboo subject, thereby restricting knowledge transmission and perpetuating myths, misconceptions, and restrictive practices across generations (Bobel, 2020). Most menstrual taboos, restrictions, and superstitions lack any scientific basis; however, they continue to persist as culturally

legitimised practices, each justified through distinct social, religious, and symbolic meanings. Cultural responses to menstruation vary significantly across regions. For instance, in several South Indian social contexts, a girl's first menstrual cycle is marked by public celebration and ritual observance, reflecting its recognition as a transition into womanhood (Shweta, 2024). In contrast, in Nepal, menstruation, particularly menarche, is treated as a severe taboo, where women and girls are subjected to *chhaupadi*, a practice that requires them to live in separate mud huts for several days during menstruation, reinforcing notions of impurity and social exclusion (Crawford et al., 2014; Khurana & Gujjar, 2021).

Collectively, these taboos function to push menstruation into silence, teaching young girls from an early age that it is something to be concealed rather than openly discussed. Such practices actively discourage adolescent girls from engaging with or understanding the physiological changes occurring in their bodies. Over time, this enforced silence has significant implications for their long-term health and reproductive well-being. Widespread misconceptions and inadequate information prevent girls from learning how to manage menstruation hygienically and safely. Moreover, when they experience physical discomfort or health-related problems, feelings of hesitation, shame, and embarrassment often inhibit them from seeking guidance or discussing these issues with family members, peers, or healthcare providers.

5. Conclusion

In the twenty-first century, and in a country with more than 691 million females, it is impossible to ignore the fact that a substantial proportion of the population experiences menstruation every month. Yet, despite its universality, menstruation continues to remain deeply stigmatised and tabooed in Indian society. The findings of this paper demonstrate that adolescent girls begin internalising and adhering to menstrual superstitions at a very young age. These practices not only shape their overall menstrual experiences but also have far-reaching consequences for their health, mobility, and overall well-being, as well as for societal development more broadly. While menstrual beliefs are often rooted in religious and cultural contexts, there is an urgent need for government-led initiatives at the national level that actively promote change at the community level. Such efforts must focus on normalising menstruation as a natural biological process and challenging the stigma that surrounds it.

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