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‘I DON’T WANT OTHERS TO KNOW, I AM ON MY PERIODS’: A STUDY ON MENSTRUATION AMONG WOMEN WORKERS OF THE UNORGANISED SECTOR IN GUWAHATI

Introduction

Menstruation is usually associated with embarrassment and a general ‘silence’ prevails in openly discussing this Women’s issue. Dominance of a strong socio-cultural factor upon this natural phenomenon is found in many societies across the globe that direct towards various myths and misconceptions associated with the process (Kumar, 1988; Koff & Rierdan, 1995; Garg, Sharma, & Sahay, 2001; Agyekum, 2002; Kothari, 2010). Though a natural biological phenomenon that mark the reproductive period of a woman, it has remained a subject that ought to be maintained in secrecy in the society. In the West, menstruation is subject to restrictions, in particular, that it should be concealed. Studies of teenage girls show that the message they receive is to ‘live as if they are not menstruating’ (Oinas, 1998; Kissling, 1996). In India as well, it has remained a secret affair of woman, socially restricting her behaviour manifold. The restricted menstrual behaviour is explained by Helman (1996) as “the subliminal rules which we may not be aware of, but which govern how we behave and think”. Similarly, behaviour around menstruation is ‘taken for granted’ by women and the reason for it was presumed to be self-evident (O’Flynn, 2006). It has been found that much emphasis is laid upon its management from the point of concealing evidences of menstrual blood. Anthropological studies on the status of menstruation in society as a whole have been seen as important when considering women’s concerns about menstruation or their menstruation-related behaviours (O’Flynn, 2006). More recently, the perception of women about their own health have been considered as an important factor influencing their health seeking behaviour. Recent work emphasising women’s experiences confirmed considerable variation in response to menstruation within and between societies. (Gottlieb, 2002;

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Hoskins, 2002). This paper attempts to understand how the covert condition around menstruation contribute to or set back concerning this natural phenomenon among women and their related behaviour affecting health.

Objectives of the study

1. To explore the 'silent' condition of menstruation among women;
2. To understand the menstrual related behaviour concerning health due to this silent condition.

Methodology

Qualitative data has been collected from 160 women in the age group of 15 to 45 years in Guwahati city. For the study, women working in different unorganised economic activities are approached through purposive sampling technique. Ethically considering the prevalent sensitivity associated with the phenomenon, those women who were willing to share information about their personal experiences were interviewed through semi structured individual and group interviews. They were asked about their menarche experience, how they had learned about menstruation, and problems they experienced at their work place. Women who had problems or sought medical help were asked about help-seeking behaviour and their consultation experiences. Interviews were taped with the participants' consent. Secondary sources like the internet, library, publications in the form of books, journals, reports and periodicals were consulted for reviewing related studies.

The women interviewed represented a heterogeneous group belonging to Assamese Hindu, Bengali Hindu, Bengali Muslim, Hindi speaking and tribal communities. All the women were engaged in different unorganised economic activities such as domestic work, daily wage labour, construction work and street vendor including vegetable vendors, food vendors, garment vendors, and petty traders. They were either sole earner or compulsory additional contributors forced by their family's economic circumstances into the unorganised sector. Guwahati, being one of the flourishing urban centres of Assam offered a viable ground for such unorganised earning opportunities to the poor and poverty stricken families. The women workers not only face the double burden of engaging in home making activities as well as activities at their workplace but are also bounded by the socio-cultural aspects of menstruation. Understanding their menstrual related behaviour gave insight into the problems faced by them being a woman.

Findings and discussion

Data on menarche was collected to explore experiences of first menstruation among the women workers and the sources through which information is passed on to the next generation. Menarche is celebrated in

Assam, popularly known as *Tuloni biya*³, though it is not a universal practice across different castes and communities but is still found today in most parts of the state. Some of the women in the study area had undergone this ritual and celebration during their first menstruation. An Assamese Hindu woman belonging to Kalita caste narrated her first menstrual experience as how it is a celebration in her society and then rules of taboos were laid down upon her. She expressed that fear was used to warn her against unwanted pregnancy and/or sexual violence:

“...I remember when I got my first *mahekiya* (menstrual period), I was kept secluded for three days in a separate closed room where no one is allowed to visit especially male members. I was given only fresh fruits and grams to eat. After three days of seclusion, I was given a ritual bath of purification, very similar to the bath ritual of a bride during marriage...First menstruation of a girl is a reason of festivity where family members rejoice and inform the society that their girl is eligible for marriage. Relatives, friends and neighbours are invited for a feast...

She further added:

....I have five sisters. My second elder sister told me how to use *kapur* (clothes) for managing stains and the restrictions and taboos I should follow from now on.....A neighbour's brother who also gave a visit warned me that I have grown up now and I should remain confined to home and avoid mingling, especially with boys. *Kunubai matile najabi* (if any boy invites you, do not go with him)...I came to know that if a woman gets pregnant, she will miss her periods” (Occupation: Domestic worker, Age: 32 years, Community: Assamese Caste, Religion: Hinduism, Educational level: Secondary level)

Another Assamese Hindu Kalita Caste woman respondent shared her menarche experience as follows:

“*Tuloni biya* holds significance in a girl's life. Based on hour and day of onset, “*gonona kora hoi*” (astrological fate is forecast)...whether a girl will have a good married life or is destined to become a widow is forecast during this time...

Further, to ensure an auspicious future for the girl, ways to counter the ill fate (if any) are also told by the astrologer which vary from a simple religious activity, observing fast to endowing items such as food, clothes, animals etc. as specified by the astrologer. The woman further added:

“*Bohut suwaliye daan dibo laga hoi ba brat palibo loga hoi* (Many girls have to make endowment or observe fast). My niece had to observe fast for three months after her menarche and her mother was asked to offer a goat in a temple...These are strict *niyam* (rules) that should be followed by a girl as suggested during menarche...I have a six year old girl child. I will observe all the rules for her at her menarche as it will lead to a good life for her....Even today, I have come across prospective grooms checking for such forecast of a prospective bride before marriage” (Occupation: Street vendor, Age: 37 years, Community: Assamese Caste, Religion: Hinduism, Educational level: Secondary level)

Menarche is seen as a symbol of sexual maturity (Cogner, 1973; Garg, Sharma, & Sahay, 2001) and it is a welcome event for a family in most societies. *Tuloni biya* among the Assamese Hindus, is marked by celebrations, merry making and rituals- some parts of which is shrouded in secrecy. It is during this time, the socialisation¹ process of a girl begins and an important part of this socialization process is the learning of culturally defined gender roles (Heslin 1999:76). During this time, various instructions and restrictions on the behaviour of a growing female are laid down. This behaviour that is considered appropriate for a gender is largely determined by societal, cultural and economic values in a given society. Menarche holds immense significance in the Assamese society and like birth, it is seen as auguring the future (Winslow, 1980). Hence, a second horoscope is made based on the hour of onset of menstruation which is consulted especially during negotiation of marriage and is directly linked to married life of a girl. Among the Sinhalese of Ceylon, this new horoscope is found to supersede the birth horoscope (Yalman, 1963). The prevalence of such rituals and ceremonies were also reported in most of the Indian states but with certain degree of variations (Dube, 1988; Bhartiya, 2013).

The celebration of menarche depicts a societal positive attitude towards the phenomenon. It can be said that celebration of this transitional stage prepares a girl ahead of her own menarche as most of them would have already attended their female friends' *tuloni biya*. Girls are found to be more prepared and look forward to their own event with a positive attitude than girls from families where it is not celebrated. Saikia (2017) acknowledged the positive attitude imbibed in the minds of adolescents as a result of celebration of *tuloni biya*. However, further empirical data would be required to establish this relationship. Non-celebration, on the other hand, has been found among the Assamese Hindus (some caste), Bengali Hindus, Muslim, some Hindi speaking and tribal communities in the present study. They observe menarche as a secret affair within the family. Somewhat similar to rest of the rituals observed in North India, this occasion is also taken care of by female relatives of the house and all rituals are introduced quietly (Dube, 1988).

A Bengali Hindu woman mentions about the menarche ritual as follows:

“In our community, we do not celebrate menarche like in the Assamese community...when my daughter attained puberty, we did not let others outside the family to know about it...we do not keep the girl secluded during menarche or on menstrual days as observed in other societies” (Occupation: Construction worker, Age: 30 years, Community: Bengali Caste, Religion: Hinduism, Educational level: Primary level)

However, changes in rituals were reported by Dube (1988) amongst educated people in towns and cities, where menarche has turned into a family affair with only the basic rituals continuing. Such changes, however, were not found in the present study, done in an urban setting, among the women workers

who traditionally celebrated menarche. They expressed willingness to continue the same tradition and rituals with their daughters even though they stayed in the city for a long time. Non celebration is found only among those who traditionally do not celebrate menarche.

It was found in the present study that some women recalled expressing menarche fear, a sense of insecurity in growing up and ignorance about the changes at menarche. It would be pertinent to mention here that these women mostly belonged to communities who do not celebrate menarche.

A Bengali Muslim woman narrated her first menstrual experience as follows:

“When I got my first *mashik*, I did not know anything about it. I stained my clothes all over and *baidew* (the female member of the family where I used to stay as domestic help) called me and told me that I have grown up. From now on I will be getting *mashik* every month, so I should be careful. Hearing this I started crying” (Occupation: Domestic worker, Age: 34 years, Community: Bengali caste, Religion: Islam, Educational level: Never went to school)

It was found that girls, who do not have any information about menarche, were at a perplexed state when starting their first menstruation. It is only at menarche that a girl is introduced to the process directly through nature. During this period, family and close relatives play a vital part in reinforcing gender roles. Many of the women workers in the present study said that they were taught only about managing menstrual stain and the restrictions to be followed by a grown up girl during their first menstruation.

A woman from Mali community of Gujarat said that-

“When I got my first period, I was only taught how to use a pad prepared from old cotton cloth by my *bhabi* (sister-in-law). Besides this, we do not have any discussion regarding menstruation. We feel embarrassed to discuss about these things with our mother. Generally, mothers do not talk to girls or a girl will not talk about it to her mother. Due to embarrassment, we also don't want to know anything. I got married after six months of my first menstruation...three years later, I was sent to my husband's house. Only after marriage, I talked about it with my husband”

When asked what idea she has about the menstrual process now, she said:

“*Kya pata? mense ho raha hain yehi pata hain*” (I don't know? I only know that menstrual period happens) - she smiled as she remarked. (Occupation: Street vendor selling second hand garments, Age: 39 years, Community: Mali caste, Religion: Hinduism, Educational level: Never went to school)

Communication between mothers and daughters on menstruation is near non-existent. Where mothers could play a vital role in imparting information, it was found that it is the mothers who were uncomfortable talking to their daughters. Information is usually provided by a sister or sister-in-law. A study in a slum of Delhi found that women fear if this form of communication was initiated, it might lead young women to ask questions about reproduction and sex. These women described their own mothers as being reluctant to discuss

the topic and they expressed the same hesitancy towards their daughters (Garg, Sharma, & Sahay, 2001). Studies have shown that lack of information results in undue fear, anxiety and wrong ideas in the minds of adolescents (Kumar, 1988; Koff & Rierdan, 1995).

It was found that discussions on menstruation are avoided not only during menarche but throughout the life of women. Referred to as '*beya kotha*' (bad conversation), girls and women usually refrain from getting into any discussion on menstruation. An Assamese woman residing in a hill area of the city expressed in a dialect prevalent in lower Assam as "*moi eglakhan beya kothat nuxumau. kisuman maiki, aamaar paharot, ase! kotha pate! Moi kintu najau*" (I do not enter into such bad conversations. Few women are there in our hill. They talk about it. But I never go with them). She believed that it is shameful to discuss about menstruation. Even discussing menstruation with males is even forbidden. A daughter will never talk about it to her father. As it is considered female matter, most women thought that it is a matter to be discussed only with one's husband and no other males. During group interviews among the construction workers in Guwahati, women workers drove away the male workers from participating or even overhearing the conversation. In a similar group interview, when a few men came in to enquire what was going on, one of the participating woman said "we are discussing women issues". Hearing this, the male workers immediately moved away. While women expressed inconvenience in discussing matters on menstruation with other males, simultaneously males also avoided interfering into discussions pertaining to 'female matter'.

Women identified a range of people with whom they would discuss menstruation, such as a very close friend, colleague or their sexual partner. But their nature of occupation is such that they are at work from early morning to late evening; so they do not have the time or friends to discuss such matters. Menstruation among women, if talked about, is only when in crisis, such as at the risk of staining or when there is any issue. Sometimes, when they get their menstrual periods at work (which is probable), it is usually their fellow workers who help with extra absorbent materials and in other cases they resort to buying low cost cotton materials from the market. "We women have to understand each other and be a help at such times, if we do not understand each other's problem who will?" reiterated a Karbi (tribal) women street vendor. She continued "...even at work, we never get time to sit and discuss any matter on menstruation amongst us. It is usually our toil that takes much of our time from actions to discussions". Women talked about it only during a crisis situation or when they are faced with a problem pertaining to menstruation. Discussing merely the process never finds a place in conversation among women and those involved in such discussions are looked down upon. In view of this, women though personally interested to know about the biological phenomenon never challenge the social norms that was internalised during their socialization process at menarche.

As discussions are avoided, so is direct mention of menstruation among the women workers under study. When asked about the local term, a Garo woman selling vegetables by the roadside expressed discomfort and embarrassment in expressing it in her local dialect "*janar rina*". She paused a few seconds before uttering it in such a low voice that she had to say it twice to be audible for the researcher. Similar expression was given by a Manipuri Hindu woman selling fresh vegetables near a bus stop in the western part of the city. She took extra precautions so as not to be overheard by her fellow vendors sitting next to her, even though all of them were female. Similarly, some of the Assamese workers who used the term '*mahekiya*' during interviews, talked in a very low tone with a certain gesture that was supposed to be understood by a female researcher. Verbal expressions such as '*sua hua*', '*nuara hua*', '*auxhubidha*', '*mense*' etc. are the commonly used euphemisms for menstruation. The exact terminology '*ritu-shraw*' (Kiran's pocket English-Assamese dictionary; Das 2006) in Assamese is such a tabooed expression that even highly educated women in Guwahati are never found using it while referring to the process. Among the educated terms such as periods, mense etc. are commonly used euphemism. Among the Akan speakers in Ghana, employing euphemisms is the major Taboo Avoidance Technique (TAT) normally used by women either in their own discussions, such as to complain about a menstrual problem or as a way to absent themselves from certain domestic activities including sex. Euphemisms are the "polished" ways of expressing verbal taboos to make them more presentable (Agyekum, 2002). In other parts of India, terms such as '*mahine se horta*' (monthly occurrence), '*chhutti se hona*' (resting period) '*kapda*' (derived from clothes used during menstruation) and so on are used (Garg, Sharma, & Sahay, 2001; Ramasubban 2008; Oommen, 2008; Kothari 2010).

In purview of maintaining secrecy around menstruation, women live with the pressure of managing stain and concealing menstrual periods. A domestic worker said '*I don't want others to know, I am on my periods*' as discussed in the case below:

The Assamese domestic workers expressed as follows:

"I am able to manage it very well. I really fear staining my clothes when I am outside. I travel by bus and it would be very embarrassing if others see my stained clothes.....*xeikarone moi khub sabodhan aibilakot* (that is why, I am very careful regarding this). I do not want people to know that - I am on my periods....."

She boasted of her efficiency to manage stain during her menstrual periods till today and able to go for work. She said:

".....I have never fallen into such situation where my clothes are stained and people came to know that I am on my periods..... there are some women who are unable to manage their menstrual stain, like I do" (Occupation: Domestic worker, Age: 34 years, Community- Assamese, Caste, Religion: Hinduism, Educational level: Secondary level)

The ability to carry on without staining and letting others know that a woman is on her menstrual periods is glorified as the efficiency of the woman in managing menstruation. Similarly, women who are inefficient suffer embarrassment that can have serious psychological impact on them. Hence, they live under constant pressure and fear of leakage during menstrual periods. In order to live with dignity within the socially prescribed norms, women require clean absorbent material and access to basic facilities such as toilet, adequate water, private place to change and appropriate place for cleaning or disposing used absorbents. It was found that most of the working places lack these facilities which pose the biggest challenge for women working in the unorganised sector. While, concealing menstruation by managing stain is a serious concern among women workers, at the same their hygiene is highly compromised. The women under study mainly used recycled cotton clothes that serve as no cost absorbent material but requiring maintenance in terms of washing, drying, storing for reuse and finally disposing. Special attention is given so as not to breach the secrecy around menstruation in all the four stages of maintenance. Washing of stained absorbent clothes are done separately and dried in a hidden place away from other clothes taking utmost care to especially keep it out of sight of especially male person. Some of the women workers reported drying inside the house in a 'safe' (where no one can see) corner or hanging somewhere below their bed. Few of them said that they dry them outside in the sun but covered under clothes in a corner where people do not pass by or at the roof top at night. Later these clothes are generally stored hidden in an unhygienic place to be reused for three to four consecutive cycles. A number of studies have reported prevalence of such secrecy in maintaining absorbent materials during menstruation among women in India (Mathews, 1995; Kothari, 2010). Such practices are unhygienic as the material dried in hidden places often remains damp, which may give rise to microbial growth and insect larvae eventually resulting in foul-smelling vaginal discharge. (Narayan, Srinivasa, Pelto, & Veerammal, 2001; Czerwinski, Wardell, Yoder, Connelly, Ternus, & al., 2001). Further, much caution is also maintained in disposing off worn-out used absorbents. Some of the women workers in the city said that proper cleaning and then burying it underground are the best disposal practices because if it is thrown away in open spaces, scavenging birds or animals may feed on it or carry it to inappropriate places. This will not only be embarrassing but also attract evil spirit. However, burying of used absorbents was possible back in the villages, these days due to their migration to the city, they do not get the same ample spaces. Some of them said that they wrap it with a polythene bag with or without cleaning before throwing it into the dustbins, drains or any dumping area in the city.

It is believed that menstrual blood is attracted to demons, hence washing, drying and disposing (of materials used for absorbing menstrual blood) in open spaces would attract evil spirits which can bring bad omen for the woman concerned. Such women, according to them, suffer from menstrual

disorders such as cramps, heavy bleeding etc further leading to problems of infertility. On the other hand, though many of them could not provide a reason for practicing this secrecy, they have been following it because, as they said, an adverse menstrual behaviour would not be acceptable to the society.

A Bengali Muslim woman said as follows:

“A woman who does not keep secrecy in maintaining her absorbent materials will have to face embarrassing situations. She will be considered ill mannered in the society where nobody would like to befriend her or even talk to her. *'sobe kobo kenekua maiki aitu, ...badchalan... Kenekoi thakibo lage najane'* (Everyone will say, what kind of lady she is...characterless...does not know the ways)” Occupation: Petty Shop Keeper, Age: 32 years, Community: Bengali, Religion: Islam, Educational Level: Never went to school.

At workplace, the heavy bleeders who require changing of absorbent materials said that they use extra layers of materials so that they do not have to change and the same absorbent suffice all day through. In few cases, even though they have access to public toilet, they refrain from using it fearing infection. Again they believe leaving evidences of menstrual blood in a public toilet, may attract evil spirit as well as would be seen by male users. Hence, they would take leave from work if their problem due to menstruation is unmanageable. While asking for leave, they cite false reasons such as '*pet bikhaise'* (stomach pain) or '*Gaatu beya lagise'* (feeling unwell) rather than the actual problem. Women working in unorganised sector, especially construction, road building, earth-digging having male supervisors, find it very difficult to ask for leave due to menstrual problems of heavy bleeding or cramps. Since women were not comfortable about discussing issues of menstruation with another male person, they rather undergo the ordeal silently since in such cases leave is never granted and they are afraid that a day off mean wages lost (Baishya and Bhattacharyya, 2015-16).

A Bengali Muslim construction worker said:

“How can I talk to a *motha manuh* (male person) about my menstruation directly? Will you be able to talk to a male person about your menstruation? *Laaj lage* (I feel embarrassed)..... I would say that I have a stomach pain or I am not well and want to leave for the day. My wages would be deducted for the day but what to do? We do not get concession for having our menstrual periods” (Occupation: Construction worker, Age: 34 years, Community-Bengali Caste, Religion: Islam, Educational level: Never went to school)

It is seen that being a tabooed subject, menstruation is shrouded in secrecy in different stages of a woman's life. The women in the unorganised sector, who married at a young age, many of whom migrated to the city having children and now due to economic liabilities had to earn for the family. Most of them are the sole earner of their families. With a low educational status, they find an easy entry into the unorganised sector. They think menstruation to be a trivial phenomenon, a woman issue ought to maintain in secrecy while their health is largely ignored and their toil for living takes the highest priority.

Most of their health problems are never consulted with a medical practitioner also due to financial constraints. It is only in extreme conditions such as heavy bleeding beyond control, a few of them said to have visited modern health practitioner or local medicine man.

A Bengali Hindu street vendor said:

“Abaar hospital goi paisu (I had to be taken to the hospital once). It so happened that I use to have heavy bleeding with large solid discharge... That day, as usual I came to work but after some time I fainted. It was my other fellow workers who took me to the hospital and I was admitted for two days”
(Occupation: Vegetable street vendor, Age: 34 years, Community- Bengali caste, Religion: Hinduism, Educational level: Never went to school)

While monitoring of menstrual symptoms may be important in efforts to address pelvic infections, cervical and uterine cancer, and anaemia (Harlow and Campbell, 2000), women continued to live silently with problems such as unbearable pain during menstruation, scanty bleeding with dark solid discharge associated with cramps, early cessation of menstruation, irregular periods and associated problems such as body-ache, headache, poor eye-sight, heaviness of the body, weakness and fatigue experienced by some of the women workers in the city.

Conclusion

The secrecy around menstruation in the society is determined by two socio-cultural factors First, there is the concept of menstrual blood as waste of the woman body, almost universally regarded as pollutants threatening the well-being of the community, and to men in particular, to the extent that even contact with her husband is limited during menstruation (Goldin, 1941; Whelan, 1975). This aspect of the negative model emphasizes men’s purity and their superiority in male-dominated societies (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988b:30-31; Agyekum 2002). Believing her to be impure state of pollution and that especially men are to be avoided be efficient in women to be special care to comply with the socially prescribed behaviour during menstrual periods. This natural phenomenon is left to be secluded, as a woman issue is required to imposing her efficiency to manage evidences of menstrual blood and to live as if she is not menstruating. Second, the belief prevails that menstrual blood attracts the evil spirit. In Sri Lanka, for example, women of menstruating age and particularly women who are actually menstruating are believed to be prone to demonic possession. In its first exposure to these dangers, the girl is made to observe an extreme level of standard defensive behaviour. She must never go out alone and especially avoid the transition points of the day-dawn, noon, dusk, and midnight-when demons lurk should totally avoid all foods attractive to demons, must surround herself with protective devices for example, carry a piece of lime or an iron areca nut cutter when out after sunset (Winslow, 1980). This belief of associating menstrual blood with demonic spirit

necessitates the menstrual related behaviour of women workers in the city observing secrecy while washing, drying, storing and disposing of used absorbent materials in hidden places. Hence, extra caution is taken not to leave evidences of menstrual blood on clothes or on a toilet after use.

The fact that menstrual process is linked to reproduction, women associate embarrassment in discussing it with their daughters, even between women and with men, is strictly forbidden. It is important that women understand this natural process and the dysfunctions associated with it. Socialization of girls at menarche can serve as a useful platform to discuss the process and its related disorders. Gilligan (1982, 1990) claimed that society's socialization of females is the reason why girl's self esteem diminishes as they grow older. Thus, efforts may be aimed at empowering girls in accepting the phenomenon as a positive natural change. Here, mothers could play a vital role, while discussions with friends and peer groups may initiate awareness at the same time and informed men may generate the needed support. Eventually, menstruation will remain a natural phenomenon as it is and will not pose a challenge adding up to the toil of women in the society.

NOTES

1. Other names such as xoru biya (small marriage) and dhuoni (word related to the purification bath) are also found to be used.
2. Socialization (in Sociology) is the process of internalizing the norms and ideologies of society. It is through socialization that social and cultural continuity is attained (Clausen, 1968; Macionis, 2013).

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