

Tolanī Biyā: A Rite of Passage to Mark Menarche in Assam

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ABSTRACT: The article depicts the ground realities of how Assamese celebrate menarche and also the ritual drama associated with it. It emphasizes the symbolic representation of coming of age as practiced in Assam while referring to mythology as a guiding force in their well-being. It also reflects the socio-cultural and religious matrix that implies the puberty rite, locally known as *Tolanī Biyā*. The fieldwork was conducted among the Assamese Brahmin community in Darrang district, Assam, from February 2021 to August 2021 and from October 2021 to January 2022. The study was conducted to portray through an anthropological lens about the regional variation of the rites practiced among diverse regions in Assam.

INTRODUCTION

An individual's life is marked by several milestones that celebrate both their biological and social transitions. These milestones are celebrated with rites of passage. According to Gennep (1960:2), "Life of every individual is marked by a series of transitions from one social status to another, and every culture prescribes some rites to depict and accompany that individual in transition." In simple terms, rites of passage refer to those rites that are observed to mark significant life transitions, such as birth, puberty, and death. The topic of this paper is one such rite of passage which is especially performed for girls. In many places, whenever a girl gets her first period, a puberty rite is performed to commemorate a girl's transition from being a child to being a woman whenever she gets her first period. One such rite is the rite of *Tolanī Biyā in Assam*, where a girl's first menstrual bleeding is celebrated to mark her menarche. In Assam, menarche is celebrated not just as a part of

social movement but also as an event to rejoice menstruation. This rite is a milestone for every Assamese Hindu girl.

In addition to "Rite of Passage" as given by Arnold Van Gennep (1960), the concept of "liminality" in rites of passage, by Turner (1967), has been incorporated largely in this study. The concept of liminal period, means a state when an individual moves from one phase of life to another phase i.e. the period where people initiate learning about appropriate behaviour, norms and actions, etc. to make them successful members of society. In contrast to the gradual process of maturation, the dramatic and symbolically charged initiation ritual quickly transforms them into adults in their lifestyles. Furthermore, the study describes how girls are subjected to various humiliating acts in order to prepare themselves for the next stage of their lives. A case study on the declining practice by Das (2017) and the work on menstrual taboos associated with this particular rite by Das (2008) illustrate *Tolanī Biyā*. These literatures have presented significant issues related to menarche and the puberty celebration in

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Assam. In addition, Das (2014) in the paper entitled “Performing the ‘Other’ in ‘Self’: Reading Gender and Menstruation through Auto-ethnography”, examines how Assamese society views gender and menstruation. Moreover, this study also gives the detail explanation of the ceremony and women’s and girl’s experiences of menstruation. Furthermore, one of the Assamese writers, Gogoi (1964) pointed out the menstrual taboos that exist in various parts of Assam to explain the contemporary situation in their society. It is commonly believed that this practice originated in Assam as a result of the annual celebration of the menstrual cycle of goddess *Kāmākhya*. It emphasizes the Assamese practice of a symbolic representation of the coming of age referring the mythology as a guiding force in their well-being. According to Shah (2012:63), the Indian epic uses several terms to describe menstruating women, including *rajasvalā*, *rtusnātā*, *māsikadharmā* and *rtukāla*. All these terms refer to psychological state and ritual pollution associated with menstruating women in the society. Despite a massive celebration and ritual to mark the beginning of menstruation in Assam, there is the presence of menstrual taboos in their society that eventually induces the irony of the fact for future discourse.

MATERIALS & METHODS

During the fieldwork, several qualitative anthropological data collection methods, including the auto-ethnographic method, in-depth interviews, and participant observation, were utilized to collect empirical data. Textual analysis was also used to refer to secondary sources in addition to primary sources. This study relies on an auto-ethnographic method in which the author reveals her own personal experiences in the study since she is from the study community. In addition, it has been taken into consideration that the auto-ethnographic method is frequently criticized because authors frequently place a high value on their own ideas in the final product. To avoid such drawbacks of auto-ethnographic and to include more perspectives on the subject matter, additionally five in-depth interviews were also conducted among young girls (belonging to the age group of 10-13) as well as their parents as they had the experience of the rite in recent times. The study is based on the fieldwork

conducted in *Boināojāpārā* village, Darrang district, Assam. This village is mainly populated by Hindu communities including *Brāhmin*, *Jogī*, *Kalitā*, *Keot* and *Koch* who all practice this rite. The present study was conducted among the *Brāhmin* community, while some other neighboring communities have also been referred to for comparative analysis of the rite. The study was conducted in two phases; the first phase was started from February 2021 to August 2021 and the second phase started from October 2021 to January 2022 in *Boināojāpārā* village, Assam. In addition, three participants from the *Kalita* community and two participants from the *Mahanta* community have been interviewed in order to comprehend the regional variation of such ritual practices. In order to understand the psychological implications of the young girls during the puberty ritual, open-ended semi-structured interviews were used. Furthermore, interviews were also conducted when some girls were in their ritualistic isolation period which provided me with an ample amount of time as the participants were sitting in their beds the whole day. The interviews with the girls and their parents helped in getting more insights about the menstrual experiences.

FINDINGS

Etymology of Tolanī Biyā

According to the English-Assamese dictionary *Hem Kosh*, the *Tolanī Biyā* is a rite of passage that is performed when a girl reaches puberty (Barua, 2000: 477). It also explains the precise meanings of the words *Tulan*, which means “the act of lifting,” and *Biyā*, which means “marriage”. The terms may indicate the time when a girl’s status is elevated to that of a woman in a ceremony like a wedding. *Tolanī Biyā* is also known as *Ādya Ritu* where “*Ādya* “ means “first occurrence” and “*Ritu*” means “menstruation” i.e. the first time someone has menstruated. Despite this, it is also known as *Nuovā-Tolanī Biyā* or *Puspitā* or *Sānti-Biyā*. But most popularly this rite is known as *Tolanī Biyā*.

Origin

The origin of this ritual is associated with the myth that has been transcended from their forefather’s in the region. There are numerous myths which are

associated with menstruation in different communities India but in Assam, the widely accepted myth about the origin of *Tolanī Biyā* is related to the *Kāmākhyā* temple located on the *Nīlācala* Hill towards the western region of Guwahati city in Assam.

An article titled, '*Sparxan*: 'Seeing' Menstruating Goddess Kamkhya through the 'ritual touch', elaborated on the myth about the temple and also explains the incident as explained in various Hindu mythology text such as *Kālikāpurān* and the *Śākta* text, that mentioned about *Satī's Yoni* or 'Genitalia' fell on the place where the *Kāmākhyā* Temple rests today (Pradhan, 2021). Eventually, the folks started worshipping the *Yoni*. The local people in Assam believe the Goddess menstruates every year in the month of June (*Ahaar* in Assamese). This particular period of menstruation is celebrated with an annual fair called *Ambubācī Melā*. Ever since, people have been following the tradition of celebrating the occurrence of menarche with a puberty rite called *Tolanī Biyā*. Here, it is necessary to mention Das' work on *Ambubācī Melā* who showed the latent association of *Ambubācī Melā* with the celebration of menstruation in Assam (Das, 2018).

The *Kāmākhyā* temple during *Ambubācī Melā* is closed for the first three days and reopens on the fourth day as it is believed that during these days of celebration, the goddess *Kāmākhyā* goes through the annual cycle of menstruation. During the *Ambubācī Melā* period, agricultural and religious activities are not performed in the region. In a similar vein, *Tolanī Biyā* is observed to commemorate a girl's first menstrual period and to introduce her to the existing menstrual customs. A girl must be alone for the first three days of her period in this ritual, and on the fourth day, she gets a ritualistic bath. Even though *Tolanī Biyā* isn't as grand as *Ambubācī Melā*, it also celebrates to honor the menstrual cycle in a similar way. As a result, we can see that *Ambubācī Melā* and *Tolanī Biyā* are two significant occasions that are regarded as a time of prosperity for the community, as people pray for healthy fertility in women.

The Ceremonial Rite

The puberty rite begins when a girl experiences her first period and lasts for a long time. The ceremony is regarded as extremely significant for a girl because

it provides her with all the substantial and psychological experiences of womanhood. The first day of the ritual begins on the first day of menstruation and lasts anywhere from four to seven days, with occasional periods lasting months. A priest typically specifies the number of days, which is also determined by the time, day, and month of the first menstrual bleeding. The researcher believes that the rite was a pivotal event in her life because it allowed her to experience both bodily and emotional changes for the first time. When the author's family members learned about her menstrual bleeding, they also arranged to provide her a separate bed. She was kept in a separate room for the first time and felt isolated from everyone else. The bed used to be made of hay, but in today's world, people prefer to use a soft cotton mattress instead. Moreover, towards the eastern corner of the room, an earthen lamp (*Cāki*) is lit on the floor along with a basket (*Dolai*) carrying rice seeds (*Cāula*), areca nut (*Tāmola*) and betel leaves (*PāG*). Because it is believed that the Sun God resides on the east side, and all these objects are ceremonial offerings to the God. This particular direction is regarded as a sacred corner. Additionally, a girl must avoid "*Gurupākīāhāra*," which translates to "those foods which are not easily digestible," and the author recalled that she was only allowed to consume fruits, as were all participants. Remarkably, elderly women make necessary arrangements to bring the girl back home "under cover" if the girl finds out about her periods outside her home because men are not supposed to see the girl. It is believed that if a man sees a girl during her period, it will have a negative impact on the girl's future. As a result, it is believed that a girl must avoid men during her period. The girl is expected to be isolated for three days starting that day whenever she has her period in the future. During the time in isolation, the girl is not permitted to be near any male member. The "No-touch rule" is always followed while the necessities, like food and clothing, are kept in storage. For either four or seven days, the girl would not be allowed to touch anything or anyone. In addition, the girl cannot see the Sun or the Moon, nor can she see any male family members, including her father. Only the girl's personal belongings are allowed to be touched. She allows other women to see her, but they must keep their distance from her. The girl is commonly referred to as *Cuvā* during these

three days, when she is considered unclean. As the prohibition against touching demonstrates, perhaps these cultural norms that influenced people to adopt Menstrual Taboos. Until this day, there are several cultural norms that set a girl apart from the rest of society. In this setting, we might recall Arnold Genep's 1960 work on rites, in which he illustrated the three distinct rites of passage stages. His idea of "Separation", the first stage of a rite of passage, perfectly fits this situation, where the person is kept apart from their normal social life. Similarly, it is believed that the girl's separation from the outside world during this first phase of the puberty ritual is a metaphor for her bodily transition.

On the second day, either the mother or a relative consult the priest (*Purohita*) or an astrologer (*Jyotishi*) for seeking guidance regarding the confinement days, the mother's *Vrata* fast, or her yoga practice. The *Jyotiṣaśāstra* is where the idea of yoga, also known as *Samyoga* and *Kanyā*, got its start. During *Tolanī Biyā*, village priests typically follow the calculations in the Assamese book *Jyotish Ghanakanti*, which was written by Bhattacharjya (1995). The good and bad times of a girl are the main concern of yoga. The *Yoga* can be classified into seven categories: *Patihitā*, *Kāntā*, *Veūyā*, *Patihīnā*, *Subhagā*, *Durbhagā* and *Duḥkhalā*. But *Kanya*, on the other hand, is all about a girl's personality, which can be predicted by looking at when a girl has her first period. It is again sub-classified into four groups: *Padminī*, *Cintinī*, *Sāṅkhinī* and *Hastinī*. In a similar vein, the priest predicted that the author would primarily be a messy and clumsy girl because the priest said she was a *Sāṅkhinī Kanyā* because she got her period in the evening.

The girl is taken for a religious bath on the fourth day of her confinement, and it is done in front of a banana tree because it is considered as sacred tree. If a girl shows *Māṅgalik Doca*, it means that her planetary situation is bad because Mars is in the wrong place. To get rid of the *Māṅgalik Doca*, the girl will have to symbolically marry a banana tree. A local priest claims that the Mars makes it difficult to get married. *Māṅgalik Doca* is thought to be resolved if a Mangalik person weds a tree or an animal. To ensure a happy marriage, a girl with *Māṅgalik Doca* must wed a banana tree during the puberty ritual

known as *Tolanī Biyā* in Assam.

The author was instructed to apply ochre to the banana tree and make three red dots – the three red dots representing three Gods (*Brahma*, *Vishnu* and *Maheswar*)- during the ritual bath. It is evident that only women gather near the girl and instruct her to perform the rite. The banana tree is finally symbolizing as a groom by these red dots, and the banana fruits represent the male reproductive organ. The girl must then use her teeth to remove a small piece of the banana's outer skin. Until the rite was over, the piece was worn around the neck. The girl is then given a paste called *Māh- Hāladhi*, which is made from black-gram and turmeric herbs and may differ from region to region. After applying *Māh- Hāladhi* right away; while singing folk songs, elderly women are expected to apply the same paste to the girl's body.

In addition to the instructions given by *Jyoticaśāstra* for carrying out the ritual, the female members have devised some amusing traditions that are considered to be part of the women's folk custom. *Tolanī Biyā* appears to be ingrained in the oral and folk traditions of the Assamese women. For instance, there is a custom in which the other female members arrange for the girl and her mother to play with an infant representation of the girl's upcoming child. Also, elderly women share their experiences of menarche to the girl through songs or through discussions which are not found in the text.

Two Assamese books namely, *Dristi-Darshan* (2019) and *Darrangi Lokagit-Sangrah* (2005) mentioned about the rite as a significant component of women's folk custom or *Strīlokācāra*. As a part of women's folk culture, it is strictly performed in women's privacy and allows only female members to participate in it. The ritual cannot be observed or attended by male members. Even though a priest is consulted for the ceremony; he is not required to perform it. The rite is carried out with the guidance and presence of elderly women from the community, we might say that it is an integral part of women's folk custom or *Strīlokācāra*.

Folk songs are the major components of each culture because they are the clear verbal expressions of their perception, as stated in the book *Darangi Lokageet-Sangrah*, compiled by Saharia (2005), a compilation of folk songs sung in the Darrang district,

Assam. In honor of *Tolanī Biyā*, a group of women sang a number of songs together, expressing not only the bride's current state of mind but also her mother's feelings about her daughter as she grew up. The following are excerpts from one folk song's lyrics to provide a brief overview of folk songs:

*Āji cāridine nolāilā rukuṇī kāṭhite gajilā kāhi
he rām/*

*Cāridinara mūre ulāilā rukuṇī a' mukhe micikiyā
hāhi ai rām//*

*Āji cāridine nolāilā rukuṇī kihere karilā bhoga
ai rām/*

*gaṇakara likirāi gaṇipari cālā pālā padumani
yogahe rām//*

*āji cāridine nolāilā rukuṇī kāṭhite gajilā kāhihe
rām/*

*cari dinara mūrata ulāilā rukuṇī yena ekanuvā
pārovā he rām//*

On the fourth day of the ritual, when the girl finally steps out from the isolation room, the aforementioned lyrics are typically sung by female neighbors or village women. This song is mostly about the girl and has strong humor in it. They are also referring to the girl's transformation during the past three days spent in isolation, her beautiful smile after the isolation period was over, and other details. Folk songs are an important part of oral tradition because they show how a girl must have felt when she was by herself. It is important to note that up until this point, we have talked about the separation period that ends with the ritualistic bath. The best explanation for this is Arnold van Gennep's (1960) work on the three-fold structure of rites of passage, which states about three stages: transition, separation, and reintegration. In Arnold van Gennep's (1960) work, the separation was referred to as the first stage, or "confinement". It was a symbolic act that suggested a separation from one's previous social status. After the ritualistic bath, she is required to sit in the middle of the courtyard with an effigy of an infant on her lap. To celebrate, the village women sing, play games, and cover each other with rice powder, mud, and ochre. The ritualistic bath

can be viewed as the second stage of the rite of passage, or transition phase, during which a girl enters the "liminality" phase, losing her childlike social status.

The girl's planetary circumstances largely determine the length of her fasting period, which begins on the fifth day and continues in a different manner thereafter. The author observed a daytime fast for seven days, during which she was only permitted to consume vegetarian or *Nirāmisca* dishes after sunset. It is believed that this period of fasting can alter a girl's destiny. People try to keep fasting for a better future. There is also variation on the number of days to be on fasting i.e., a week or a month or more etc. The author had stayed for seven days on fasting. Depending on the circumstances and influence of planet influence, the astrologer calculated and determined the length of the fast, which can last anywhere from seven days to three months. On the first day after completion of the fasting period, a priest is invited to bless the girl and release her from her transition. According to Chandra (1900), this section is referred to as "*Penance*" in the local language. The girl finally leaves her previous social status, advances to a new social status, and is once more incorporated into the social life of her new social status. This final stage of any rite of passage, according to Gennep (1960), is the point at which a person is finally "reincorporated" into a society's daily life. Even though this ceremony is performed to commemorate the adolescent girl's transformation into a woman who is now eligible for marriage, it also imposes numerous restrictions on the girl for the rest of her life.

DISCUSSION

An attempt is made to provide a comprehensive description of the ceremonial rite which may be useful for further evaluation of the related socio-cultural aspects. As previously stated, *Tolanī Biyā* is observed in every corner of Assam. However, the way puberty rites are observed varies from region to region and community to community. Some of the puberty rites vary from village to village, according to observations. Therefore, it is challenging to comprehend the rite that is carried out in various regions of the state. An informant claims that, in place of a banana tree, *Mahantas* and other communities in the Nagaon

district of Assam plant three bamboos. So, banana trees are typically substituted for bamboo. The interviewee, on the other hand, has confirmed that this custom might not be followed in other parts of the Nagaon district in Assam. This has provided a new insight to the regional variation and community variation of the rite. For discussing the differences between communities, the author's village is considered for illustration: the *Kalita* community strictly adheres to the custom of marrying a banana tree, whereas the Brahmin community does not.

A further observation has been the different approaches taken by urban and rural communities to performing these rites. Most of the urban participants are still reluctant to have a grand puberty celebration since they believe it should be held in the family's private space. Since menstruation is regarded as a very special and private time for women, people don't feel compelled to perform the ritual to acknowledge it. This might be due to the numerous rules, superstitions, taboos, and the notion of purity that are associated with these rites. Therefore, modern education and urbanization have significantly impacted the rite.

Changes and Continuity

There are some changes in practicing the rituals in the study area. It is practiced in more complex forms than it was previously in *Boinājāpārā* village. The respondents stated that in the past, the puberty rite was more of a private family matter than a public one. Private due to the fact that only family members take part in the ritual, and the ceremonial bath was taken in front of only family members rather than the neighbors. Majority of family members in the same families have moved to nearby towns for work or other reasons, making it difficult to plan the feast. As a result, people began requesting assistance from neighbors to plan the feast, *Bhoja*. Older days, girls got married before they got their first period, but they had to stay with their parents until they got their period. Her husband would come to take her to their parents' house after this puberty ritual, and she would leave her home permanently. As a result of the introduction of modern education, people stopped doing child marriages and started using symbolic grooms for the ceremony, which continues to be performed today. So, the ceremonial bath and the period of isolation haven't

changed much. As stated, a girl's puberty ritual consisted of a brief period of fasting before receiving a ritualistic bath. It was observed that there were a lot of big celebrations of puberty in the 1990s. The girl would then be dressed as a real bride in the traditional bridal costume known as *Kainā* or Bride, and a large feast known as *Bhoja* would be planned for the occasion. Also, people started calling the girl *Kainā* or Bride and giving her gifts. Presently, larger celebrations have become more common. The celebrations involve extravagant feasts, elegantly decorated homes, designer gowns, music systems, and most important, these little brides anticipating beautiful gifts from their guests. Girls forget all the physical suffering they have endured over the past four to seven days as they eagerly await this ceremony. The young adolescent girl's attitude toward menstruation is also exemplified by this particular behavior.

The present study had encountered several factors that contributed to these shifts. However, the spread of modern education enforced people to reevaluate the social norms and idea of purity that are associated with menstruation. This induces an environment for the young generations to shift their view of their traditional way of life. Additionally, shifting circumstances of the celebration may also be attributed to the economic aspect of the people. In *Boinājāpārā*, during the 1970s and 1980s, the puberty ritual was performed on a shoestring budget, and only family members and village residents were invited to the feast because most people were farmers. In contrast, after the 1980s, individuals began to venture outside of their villages in search of employment opportunities in areas such as business, government service etc. Most importantly, people were exposed to a wide range of external factors, including education and modern sanitary products that have had a significant impact on how people and communities view menstruation and menstrual taboos. The ritual is also influenced by modernization, which can be seen in the way people dress, the foods they eat, the decorations they put up, the gifts they give, and more. Digital photography and videography are also becoming more common during the ceremonies. In addition, these elements have ultimately shaped the tradition into its current form. People are

inviting more people than ever before and have connected with people from diverse regions as a result of the ever-increasing level of connectivity. These advancements in communication and technology contribute to the grand celebration. This study has shown that the puberty ritual has changed a lot since its inception, but one thing that has stayed the same is that people have always given this natural menstrual cycle a lot of importance in their cultural practices.

It may also refer to Das's (2017) writings that demonstrated the shifts in the Assamese society's celebration of *Tolanī Biyā*. She went into more detail about how to celebrate puberty, and she discovered that nowadays, people usually don't celebrate menstruation in public. She highlighted that there are still rules and rituals, but only the celebration part is going away. In contrast, this study has observed instances of extravagant preparations for the puberty ceremony. The villagers of *Boināojāpārā* have continued to celebrate the rite with pomp and show, indicating that the rites and their ceremony are still very much alive. The area of study in Das's (2017) work was Guwahati, a city, whereas the current study was carried out in *Boināojāpārā* village, a rural area in Assam. People in urban areas are noticeably exposed to different lifestyles, including jobs, education, and western way of life, etc. In addition, the celebration takes a lot of time, but most people in urban areas are working in diverse field. Also, it's hard for close relatives to get together for the celebration in urban areas because most of them were unable to manage their time. Most of the participants informed that they prefer to celebrate the rite in a private setting with only family members participating because of all the new ideas and time constraints. Some people have also said that the puberty rite should not be celebrated because people think it's more private and unique because only one person experiences the whole thing, so they try to keep it private instead of telling the rest of the world. Das's (2017) elaborated on the celebration of puberty and she found out that in present times, public celebration on the onset of menarche is not common. She mentioned that rituals and restrictions are still present but only the celebration part is fading away. On the contrary, this study has come across instances where people are making grand arrangements for the puberty rite. While studying, it has been found that the rites

and its ceremony are still very much alive among the villagers of *Boināojāpārā* as people have continued to celebrate the rite with pomp and show.

Menstrual Taboos

It has been observed that the concept of menstrual taboos has found an important place in the ritual. This ritual is the event where a girl is being introduced to various rules and restrictions that are associated with the process of menstruation. In a menstrual cycle, a girl is seen following some taboos (*Nisiddha*) related to menstruation. These taboos mainly refer to those social customs that restrict or forbid an individual from many facets of social life, (Young *et al.*, 1965). As discussed earlier that the restrictions range from the limitations on personal behavior, physical seclusion in a segregated area and avoidance of interaction with the male members. Despite all this, there may be some relaxation of menstrual taboos on the period of isolation and on touching things, which varies from household to household.

Shah (2012) has referred to several terms like *rajasvalā* used for menstruating women in the Indian epic which literally means dirt or impurity. Other terms found in the epic are *rtusnātā*, *māsikadharmā* and *rtukāla* which are indicative of psychological condition and they also have the connotation of pollution. This kind of connotation is still associated with menstruating women in different parts of Assam and to explain such matters an Assamese writer, Gogoi (1964), has illustrated on menstrual taboos that exist in different parts of Assam. He explained that a girl is considered as *Cuvā*, meaning impure as she can neither touch nor can be touched by anyone during her first period (Gogoi, 1964). This kind of belief is deeply rooted in society and people tend to believe that if someone touches a menstruating girl it will become impure as the girl is menstruating.

Furthermore, Das (2008) has brought out a discussion on menstrual taboos in her paper titled, 'Menstruation as Pollution: Taboos in Simlitola, Assam'. She attempted to look into the sociological world of menstruation in the form of taboos in the life of Hindu Assamese women in Simlitola and also how it defines the existence of women in it. She has brought forth a sensitive issue of menstrual taboos which is

necessary for a better understanding of the socio-cultural world of menstruation. In addition, Das (2014) has put forward another paper titled, 'Performing the 'Other' in 'Self': Reading Gender and Menstruation through Auto-ethnography', which helped in explaining the idea of gender in relation to menstruation as practiced in Assamese society. She showed ways to deal with the explanation of the ceremony and also contributed towards the study of women's and girl's experiences of menstruation

In the book *Purity And Danger* (1966), Douglas has argued that the concepts of taboos, pollution and dirt exist in all society and these concepts have emerged to create order within the society. That means, the concept of pollution, dirt and taboos are the symbolic constructions to avoid ambiguities in an orderly world. Douglas (1970) extended her study on ritual, symbols and pollution in her books like *Natural Symbols* (1970) and *Implicit Meanings* (1975). She explains that people tend to create order in their society with the help of various symbolic phenomena and whenever they were unable to accurately place a phenomenon into the order of the pre-existing symbolic world, they termed it as impure or dirt. Mary Douglas's theory on the creation of menstrual taboos could be a possible explanation for the construction of the symbolic terms in Assamese society as native people believe that menstruation is something that brings disturbances in the orderly way of life or something that breaks everydayness. Menstruation is often understood as something that breaks the everyday routine in one's life and people tend to place this phenomenon as something which creates disruption to daily routine. Thus, menstrual taboos have been understood as the symbolic constructions of people to understand and give meaning to their social-cultural environment.

In the above discussion on ceremony, we can say that the rite is clouded with many taboos which can be understood from the existence of the concepts like *Civa* means 'impure', *Asuvidhā* means 'difficulty'. There are two contrasting ideas that are revolving around menstrual blood including the thought which acknowledges a belief that menstrual blood (Goddess *Kāmākhya's* blood) is powerful and people celebrate this period. However, the other school of thought believes that if a girl menstruates her blood has the

power to contaminate the purity. During this period of menstruation, the girl must remain isolated for a period. She is not allowed to touch anything but her belongings only, male members are to be avoided for a period and she is not allowed to cook or visit temples until the end of her menstrual cycle. These connotations have implications on young girls and women that are being neglected for years. The author reflected on this matter by saying that it is uncomfortable for her to talk about menstruation freely because it is still a "hush affair" among girls in Assam. Later in life, all these stigmatizations have implications on mental health such as insecurity and low self-esteem among young girls and women and these experiences have been further explored in the following section on menstrual experiences.

Menstrual Experiences

The most unique thing about being a woman is going through menstruation. Additionally, this event is significant for the individual as well as the community. Menstrual experiences from the rite in *Boinājāpārā* village are compiled in this study. The best illustration of how significant menstruation is for both the family and the community in Assam is *Tolanī Biyā*. As a girl has finally become capable of giving birth and is ready for marriage, people gather to celebrate her first period like a wedding. The author expressed her sense of uncertainty as they talked about the menstrual experience. She stayed in a separate room for the first time and was being taught a lot of new rules of behavior, so going into detail about the isolation period was very upsetting. She eventually began to adjust to the situation and adhere to additional rules.

As a part of the study, in-depth interviews were conducted with five young girls and their parents in the *Boinājāpārā* village in Assam to learn more about their menstrual experiences. These five people, who were in 10-13 age, were selected primarily on the basis of their prior experience with the ceremony. Girls have reported a variety of mental and physical challenges throughout the ceremony, according to the interviews. These experiences included physical and mental issues like headaches, cramps, acne, anxiety, and depression, among other things. When the five participants first started having their periods, they all

mentioned about feelings of shock and anxiety. However, as they learn about menstruation before menarche, they try to relax. On the other hand, when these people talk about the gifts, dresses, and arrangements that were in *Tolanī Biyā*, they seem excited. They were ridiculed multiple times by the elderly people with the banana tree because the tree is considered to be her husband, so in addition to this excitement, there is also embarrassment. Aside from these things, girls don't like it when they are kept apart and can't touch anything or see their brothers or fathers. The study reveals that the young girls from the *Boināojāpārā* enjoy the *Tolanī Biyā* ceremony, with the exception of some of its rituals, such as the isolation ceremony and taboos regarding menstruation.

Additionally, the experiences of the parents should be taken into consideration because the mother and father play different roles and experience different emotions throughout the ritual. As a mother, they teach their daughter about menstruation as part of the puberty ritual. Mother takes an active part in the ceremony. Additionally, the father is prohibited from seeing his daughter, so he participates passively in the ceremony. Interviews were conducted with the parents of the aforementioned participants to learn about their experiences during the ceremony. In each of the five cases, it was noticed that the mothers had an unusual amount of responsibility because they had to talk to their daughters about the moral and social aspects of menstruation. In three instances, the fathers were overcome with emotion and wept when they saw their daughter for the first time following the ceremony, while the other two fathers remained concerned about the situation. Parents shed lot of tears for a variety of reasons, but the most common reason is that they have come to terms with their transition from one stage of life to the other. As a result, this rite of passage marks one of life's most significant transitions and is marked by a variety of emotions for both the child and the parents.

CONCLUSION

The study attempted to illustrate the rite, which has always marked a significant moment for every girl in the Assamese village of *Boināojāpārā*. While studying, we have noticed that preceding literature

has chiefly discussed the traditional way of celebrating on the onset of menarche with special reference to menstruation, menstrual behavior, gender issues, and how the custom changed over time. In this paper, we presented a comprehensive investigation of the ceremony's ritual drama, which is thought to reflect on the separation, transition, and re-incorporation phases of the ritual, respectively. The classic anthropological works of Arnold van Gennep (1960) and Victor Turner (1967;1969) on the rite of passage gives an anthropological understanding. The three-fold structure of the rite of passage seems to fit into the analysis of the rite that is carried out in *Boināojāpārā*. In the meantime, this paper has attempted to cover menstrual experiences and the rite's evolution over time.

The paper has demonstrated the diversity of this rite's practice by citing variations in execution in various communities and regions in Assam. It also demonstrates the irony of the fact that, despite a massive celebration and ritual to mark the beginning of menstruation, there are still menstrual taboos in society today by delving into the taboos that are associated with menstruation. Girls have been observed experiencing a variety of emotions, including loneliness, shock, anxiety, and others, during the ritual, etc. This custom is carried out in different forms in urban and rural areas, with urban dwellers typically preferring a more private affair and rural dwellers preferring a more public affair with more people present. The ritual is also influenced by modernization, which can be seen in the way people dress, the foods they eat, the decorations they put up, the gifts they give, and more. Digital photography and videography are also becoming more common during the ceremonies. As a result of the aforementioned changes, it has been observed that the celebration in the village of *Boināojāpārā* has only grown in size over time. Similar to marriage and other ceremonies, it has become more like a social compulsion. This study might be helpful to future studies so as to understand the current social and cultural practices that are associated with menstruation all over the world.

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