

**Debashri Bharali and Mini Bhattacharyya Thakur**

## **LIFE OF A MENSTRUATING WOMAN AS AN 'IMPURE BEING' IN TRADITIONAL ASSAMESE SUT SOCIETY**

### ***Abstract***

*In Assamese Sut society menstruation is considered as pollution and unholy in nature. From the very onset of menarche a girl is taught about menstruation as pollution, a kind of taboo. She is inculcated which the behavior that she has to follow to protect others from such impurity. Menstrual taboos are filled with religious and cultural norms of society and reside in people's mind in such a way that no one can escape from it. Sut's are one of the major castes of Assam, the north eastern state of India who follows Hinduism. The present study explores the menstrual taboos, beliefs and underlying causes of its changes among the Sut caste people of Lakhimpur and Dhemaji district of Assam. Qualitative individual and group interview guided by semi structured open ended schedule, observation and collection of case studies were the methods of data collection during fieldwork. The deviation from the joint family to the nuclear family system, the growing participation of women in economic activities, impacts of modernity etc. contributes towards attitudinal changes and alternation in many menstrual taboos. But the basic ideas still exist in their minds. Women's status in religious and communal events deteriorated with the violation of such taboos. In real sense the impurity is not related to dirt or unhygienic act but it's in the people's mind which make anything impure and unclean with single touch of a menstruating woman.*

**Keywords:** *Menstruation, Impurity, Social Status, Modernity and changes, Sut community.*

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### **Introduction**

Menstruation is a natural physiological process which marks the

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**DEBASHRI BHARALI**, Research Scholar, Department of Anthropology, Gauhati University, Email Id: debashrigkd@gmail.com, **MINI BHATTACHARYYA THAKUR**, Professor, Department of Anthropology, Gauhati University, Guwahati, Assam.

puberty in female. But this normal biological process is surrounded by different myths, rituals, superstitions and taboos which affects women psychologically and socio- culturally at a deeper level. The concept of menstrual impurity is worldwide in nature which imposes various taboos on women ranging from restriction in cooking, entering temple to seclusion in menstrual hut. The concept of menstruation has different explanations. As cited by Crawford, two basic ideas about the purpose of menstruation are that it's a process of purification of female's blood as put forward by Hippocrates and it ejects excessive blood from woman's body. Hippocrates argued that women's bodies are colder than men and they cannot sweat like men to eject their impurities. Therefore to remove the impurity from their body they menstruate. (1981: 51)

Anthropological and Sociological studies on menstruation clearly express the pollution and dangers associated with a menstruating woman especially for men for which woman have to seclude themselves in remote places. The Huaulu women of Seram, Indonesia have to live in menstrual huts during menstrual periods and childbirth. They regard menstrual blood polluting and harmful for the men and therefore exclude adult men from menstrual hut under the risk of death. Women leave the hut when their flow stops and must spend the first night in the kitchen of the village temple and then only can return to their house. (Hoskins, 2002: 317-318). Similar instances are found in Ethiopia where Jewish women moved to a remote menstrual hut in the village named *margamgajo*, meaning curse hut. (Cicurel and Sharaby, 2007:73). During menstruation Balinese women sleep apart, may not cook, enter the temple and perform any religious activities. She is supposed to wear separate menstrual cloth, use separate utensils and from menarche to menopause she may not handle the serpent bladed heirlooms daggers or dagger like spurs of the fighting cocks which are men's property. On the third day after washing her hair she is supposed to drink holy water to become normal and pure again. (Pederson, 2002:303-304). Among the Hebrew, a husband is not allowed to touch her wife, eat together, sit on a bench where his wife sits, sleeps together etc. He must separate himself until her flow stops and she takes the ritual bath for purification. (Kamsler,1938; 76-82). Such traditions reflect the superiority of men over women where women have to be responsible to maintain the purity especially for the protection of men.

In Hindu mythic context menstruation is considered as impure and polluting for which different proscriptions are mentioned for a menstruating woman. While discussing the mythic origin of menstrual taboos in India, Chawla writes, "Traditional cultural construction of menstruation and female body is differing considerably from bio- chemical model." It is mentioned in the Veda when Indra had slain Vritra, the three headed son of Tvashtri, everyone called him a slayer of Brahmana and to get rid of this the great guilt he request women to take third part of this guilt. Women agreed and thus that guilt of Brahmana murder appears as menstrual flow to women and therefore she has

to follow different restrictions during periods. (Chawla 1994: 2817-2819). Kothari interpreting the of menstrual taboo writes, "Most of these fall into two broad divisions-(a) psychogenic fear of menstrual blood and (b) sociogenic patriarchal social system perceiving the menstruating women as impure or dirty...as this issue is often not discussed openly in the Indian society, this has lead women to accept the physical and psychological problems related to menstruation as a normal state of being and not something for which treatment seeking was required". (2010: 45)

In India menstruation is considered to be a tabooed subject about which women hesitate to discuss openly in public and especially in front of men as it is an extremely shameful matter to discuss. Negatively it is viewed as an impure and mysterious process for which women has to observe many restrictions. Positively it is linked with fertility, womanhood and viewed as a helpful natural process to eject body dirt's of women. Menstruation is treated as purely woman's affair about which men folks are neither aware nor much interested. The silence and hesitation often lead to construction of poor perception and attitude about the process as mothers and elders of the family do not interact much in this matter. In different parts of India, girl's remains absent from school or drop out early after attainment of menarche and menstruation is found to affect their daily school activities. Different factors like lack of sanitary products, lack of hygiene facilities, cultural taboos, fears of possible stain and health issues are found associated with such problems (Sivakami et.al, 2019). According to a report by the NGO Dasra, nearly 23 million girls in India drop out of schools annually due to lack of proper menstrual hygiene management facilities and awareness about the process (Dutta, 2018). In 2019, Vashist et.al., emphasized the need to counsel mothers about the ill effects of adhering to traditional taboos around menstruation. In their study among the 600 adolescent girls in different government schools in Delhi it was reported that 40% of the studied population remains absent from schools during their periods and along with above mentioned factors, the absenteeism is significantly associated with the restrictions imposed during periods and period pain. To overcome such kinds of problems there is need of more studies on menstruation to understand the cultural attitude of people towards menstruation in different population to remove the underlying obstacles in this regard. But studies on menstruation are inadequate in India in comparison to other countries. Even in liberal academic field itself menstruation has been a taboo subject and due to the discomfort in public discussion the topic is not covered much (Patar, 2019).The majority of literature on menstruation in India (Devi, K. 2008; Shanbhag, D. et.al., 2012; Sivakami et.al. 2019) has focused mainly on the menstrual hygiene status and level of awareness among the school going adolescents. Taboos, rituals and myths around the matter are ignored by most of the studies in India.

In Assam, Koibarta caste people of Simlitola in Goalpara district

considered menstruation as pollution and numerous taboos in cooking, performing religious activities etc. are followed by women every time during periods due to the fear of ill health, unhappy married life and also for the preservation of their cultural identity as an Assamese. (Das, 2006). In an Assamese Hindu society menstrual women are restricted through different taboos and even in urban settings changes in menstrual behavior is not socially acceptable. It was noted that while going to earn for the basic needs of their family, women workers of Guwahati city of Assam have to deprive of a good social environment to live due to the violation of menstrual taboos. (Baishya and Bhattacharyya, 2019.) Traditional restriction and unsafe practices regarding menstruation are found very common among the adolescents of urban slums of Jorhat District of Assam. 97.27% were observing restriction during menstruation and 59.09% were using sanitary napkins. Only 47.27% girls possess knowledge about menstruation prior to their menarche and mother was the first informant to 65.38% of them. Among them the most significant factor affecting menstrual behavior was literacy and awareness about menstruation (Das and Tasa, 2019). Such kinds of studies on menstruation in Assam have looked into the matter from the perspectives of urban women workers and slum population of some particular areas of the region. Studies on menstrual taboos and practices among the different castes of the region inhabiting in rural patriarchal settings of Assam is scarce. The available studies on menstruation in the region reinforce the need of educating people to understand the importance of safe and hygienic practices during menstruation and bring them out from superstitions and cultural misconception about menstruation. Therefore, the present study tries to understand the concept of menstrual impurity among the Sut population of the region which has not yet been covered in academic fields. The study aims to:

1. Explore the menstrual behavior and associated beliefs among the people.
2. To find out the changes and alternation in menstrual taboos and its underlying causes.

### **Methods and techniques**

The study is carried on 50 men and 100 women of age between 12 to 75 years to understand the notion of menstrual impurity in a vivid manner. The fieldwork was conducted in two villages of Lakhimpur and Dhemaji district of Assam during May to December of 2018. Data were collected through qualitative individual and group interview guided by semi structured open ended schedule. Case study and observation of their routine during menstruation was also used to understand and verify the process better. As menstruation is a publicly unspoken matter and people feel very shy to talk about it therefore utmost care were taken while deciding the place and time of data collection. To most of the woman menstruation is a private womanly matter and there is nothing to talk about it. Therefore before the interview it was necessary to make them aware about the significance and purpose of the

study. Other techniques that were taken into consideration are the collection of local magazines, questionnaire, use of field diary, photographing etc.

### **The people**

The Suts are one of the major castes of Assam. They are homogenous, patrilineal and monogamous in nature. Marriage between own caste is highly preferred. Sut is called as an ancient Indian Aryan caste. According to the Assamese dictionary *Hemkosh* the term Sut denotes a person born in the womb of a Brahmin daughter by a Kshatriya man. Therefore they are sometimes called as mixed caste. The study population can be divided into two sections of Hinduism i.e. *Srimanta Sankar Sanghariya* or *Eksharan Naam Dharmiyo* and *Bamuniya*. Among these two sections there is difference in performing menarche rituals. Followers of *Srimanta Sankar Sangha* never do astrological calculation at the onset of menarche where *Bamuniya* section does not allow the girl to eat anything until the astrological calculation of her *kanyakalar jug* means her astrological status. The former follows the Neo-Vaishnavism initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva and strongly oppose idol worship. They never visits temple nor do any sacrifices to God. According to them Lord Krishna is the supreme of all God and Goddess and worshiping Krishna means worshipping of all. On the other hand the *Bamuniya* Hindus worship idol of Hindu God and Goddesses and offer animal sacrifices to God.

### **Findings and discussion**

Among the female respondents, 77% are married women out of which 4% are widow and 23% are unmarried woman. Regarding educational qualification of married women, 10% studied up to lower primary level (class I-V), another 10% studied up to upper primary level (VI-VIII), 49% studied up to secondary level, 5% never went to school and 4% completed their graduation. Among the unmarried women, 5% is studying in upper primary level, 10% studying in Secondary level, 3% completed graduation, and 4% doing post graduation. Regarding occupation, 57% women are housewife, 11% are professional weaver, 11% are government employee, 2% are shopkeeper and 19% are student. Among the male respondents 66% are married. Regarding educational qualification of married men, 5% studied up to lower primary level (class I-V), another 6% studied up to upper primary level (VI-VIII), 30% studied up to secondary level, 5% never went to school and 20% completed their graduation. Among the unmarried men, 12% studying in Secondary level, 17% completed graduation, and 5% doing post graduation. Regarding occupation, 25% men are government employee, 28% are cultivator, 7% are carpenter, 15% are shopkeeper and 25% are student.

### **Menstrual Impurity and associated taboos**

In Sut society menstruation, childbirth and death are regarded as major

sources of pollution. Sut community considers menstruation as *suwa* means impurity as it ejects dirty blood from woman's body. Monthly cycle is termed as *suwahuwa*, *nuarahuwa* or *akhubidhahua* which means become impure and unable to do work. Menstruating women are considered as polluting, untouchable, profane and vulnerable to be attacked by evil spirits. To protect others from being contaminated with her impurity, women have to follow many taboos for seven days every month during menstruation. Everything becomes impure with single touch of a menstruating woman and one who comes in contact with her has to bath immediate to regain his or her purity. The impurity is believed to spread to both animate and inanimate objects and with a single touch of the menstruating women, for example flowers and plants dies, pickles and fruits rot. Such kinds of beliefs reflect the fear for the mysterious menstrual blood and its impurity which can harm anything in its touch. There is a belief that if a menstruating woman touches her husband during her period it lessens his life span and the state is termed as *Ayukh komi jua*. This clearly depicts the danger associated with a menstruating woman which gives her a special power over her immediate surroundings where she has to be conscious about men to protect them from the danger. Similar instances was asserted by Pilny that coming in contact with menstruating women grass dies, wine sours, vines wither, fruits will fall with her sitting under a tree, knife turn blunt, looking glass will discolor with her glance in it, dogs will go mad eating her blood etc. (Crowford 1981:59)

### **Coming of age Seclusion and Taboos on menstruating women**

Although menstruation is a matter of concealment and not discussed publicly but in Assam majority of the population including Sut community celebrates a girl's first menstruation publicly though there are variation in their rituals. The rituals of menarche play an important role in constructing feminine identity and declare the status and role of a menstruating woman in her upcoming days in her society. It is called *Santi Biya* because the girl on achieving menarche is ensured of her capabilities of producing children and that is why her life becomes peaceful from that time. This kind of attitude expresses the importance of producing offspring by a woman without which she never attain the prestige and status in society. Among the Sut community first menstrual cycle is regarded as most polluting of all. A woman has to follow more taboos during her menarche than her usual periods. A menstruating girl is kept in seclusion for seven days in a separate room and men are not allowed to see her as it is a taboo. In *Bamuniya* households the girl is not allowed to eat anything until the astrological calculation. Immediately a family member would rush to an astrologer who makes the calculation by checking her time of menstruation and points out how many days of confinement and fasting she has to go through. Her fasting can be short as four days or as long as two to three months depending on the position of *grah nakshyatra* (stars) which confirms her *jug* (astrological state) during the onset of menarche. The

astrological state determines the days of fasting, food taboos and the other processes of rituals. Generally five types of items consisting of fruits, grams, pulses, milk and water are served to the girl during her fasting period. From the fourth day she is allowed to have *hidhaa vat* (boiled rice) only for one time in a day before the sunset. Until the fourth day she is forbidden from taking bath, touch anyone, go outside, comb her hair, see her face in the mirror, brush her teeth, cut her fingernails, reading books etc. All taboos come to an end on the seventh day or on the day of her *santi biya* when she is given a communal purification bath with holy basil water, turmeric and gram paste. Girls are made to follow the menarche taboos for a peaceful life in future. Expressing the importance of taboos and associated purification rituals during menarche an old lady said:

*“Santi huwa suwatu kesa suwa aru sobokoi besi letera suwa karon haiya ejoni suwalir pratham suwa”*. (The menarche impurity is the highest and raw impurity as it is a girl's first menstruation). One must observe all the taboos during this time for a happy married life in future as misfortune may touch if one breaks the taboos during menarche seclusion period. *“Kanyakalar dukhtu dangor dukh”*(The misfortune of menarche is a very serious kind). During seclusion some girls break the taboos and eat secretly tabooed items like meat, fish, and vegetable curry cooked with oil etc. It may hamper woman's life after marriage also as she may face difficulty in conceiving and may suffer from different menstruation related health issues. (Age-70, Occupation: Housewife, Educational level: Up to 5th standard)

Among the Suts, the rituals of menarche train adolescents about the do's and don'ts of the society and responsibilities of a girl as future wife and mother. One newly menstruating girl narrated the lessons she got from her relative aunt during her menarche rituals:

*“Now you are a grown up girl. Keep distance from boys and do not mix-up with them. Do help your mom in household works and obey your mom. Be calm and polite to others.”*(Age-15, Educational Qualification- Studying in class IX, Religion-Hinduism)

These kinds of instructions depict the lack of trust on men and prohibition of sexual intimacy before marriage which is not acceptable by the society. In a patriarchal setting women are desired to be an obedient, calm and expert in household works by her society. Thus the rituals and taboos of menarche try to frame the young girls in accordance to norms and values of patriarchy.

### **Taboos on usual monthly periods**

A woman in her entire menstruating life has to follow many restrictions

to safeguard her family and other people from the impurity. She should not touch anything animate or inanimate around her during the first two days of her menstruation. She has to sleep in a separate bed alone. Earlier this restriction was up to the fourth day. But now it is lessened to two days as per own convenience. One married woman has narrated as follows:

‘One has to take bath immediately if touched by a menstruating woman on her first two days of menstruation. During periods I try not to touch any household item even the door curtains. My mother-in-law is very strict in this matter. I used to carry my own stole to sit anywhere I go. I never go outside without any emergency. I have to sprinkle holy water (water consisting of basil in it) on objects which I touched by mistake to make it pure. But impurity does not touch children’s body as they are gift from God and very pure in nature. Therefore everyone takes my nine month old baby from my lap during my menstruation also. But after the childbirth until one gets her menstruation back, other menstruating women is not allowed to touch the baby. I don’t allow my nine year old son to touch me in those days as he is now growing up.’ (Age: 34, Occupation: Housewife, Educational level: Up to 9<sup>th</sup> standard.)

Women strictly follow the taboos pertaining to cooking and doing religious activities during menstruation. Until the 5<sup>th</sup> day women avoid cooking for her family. Food is served before her during meal hours and separate utensils on which she eats is to be cleaned by her. She is not allowed to have her food together with other family members. Women used to sit apart in the floor and cannot share their rest food with anyone, even with domesticated animals. People have different explanation about existence and needs of such taboos. An aged woman said:

“All taboos have some scientific reason behind its existence. Women bodies are weak during menstruation and require rest. Menstrual taboos give ample rest to women from the hectic household chore. It is not good for us if we cook for others in such polluted state. God will be offended with violation of such taboos. Earlier I used to keep fasting on the sixth day night and enter kitchen from the seventh day. But now my daughter-in-law handles kitchen and she hardly follows this rule. Women are rejecting many of such taboos on the basis of their own convenience and hence they are affected by many diseases. They are also endangering their husband’s life and becoming widow at an early age.” (Age: 65, Educational qualification: Up to 5<sup>th</sup> standard, Occupation: Housewife).

Hence, menstrual taboos sometimes even work as negative



magic as its violation may bring ill health, bad luck or even death to husband. Old generation shows their dissatisfaction towards the young women on violation of taboos as they believed taboos have some good reasons behind it.

### **The sacred and profane; Religious taboos of menstruation**

The ideas of purity and impurity are widely prevalent in Hinduism. All bodily ejections are considered as pollution and thus the menstrual blood is dirty and profane by nature. According to Durkheim, "sacred things are the things protected by prohibitions, and profane things are those things to which prohibitions are applied and they must keep a distance from what are sacred" (Durkheim, 1995:38 cited in Patar,2019). Patar argued that the mystery around menstruation makes it appear as a sacred one, and at the same time social construction of pollution makes it a profane affair (ibid: 70). The superstitions and myths around menstruation make it a mysterious event which even occurs in completion of one lunar month. As both sacred and profane are subject of prohibition thus menstruation can be a matter of prohibition. As menstrual impurity is considered not acceptable in religious environments women very strictly show obedience to the religious restrictions to maintain the sacredness of Gods and deities. A Sut woman might break other menstrual taboos on emergency situation but never the religious taboos. Women prohibit themselves from religious ceremonies, temple, and any kind of rituals until the seventh day of their cycle or the complete stop of bleeding. The age old stories about menstruation in religious texts of Hinduism occupy people's minds for centuries. One *bhakat* (man who performs rituals in *naamghar*, the prayer house of Assamese people for congregational worship) narrated about the position of a woman during menstrual cycle as follows:

"Woman on her first day of menstruation is called as 'Brahmacharini' as she ejects her energy from her body. On the second day she is called as 'Chandalini' i.e. an evil caste woman, on the third day she is 'Koibartini' means a lower caste woman and ultimately on the fourth day she become 'Swajatini' that means member of her own caste. From the fourth day she can do all activities except entering prayer house and cooking. Women got menstruation due to Indra's guilty of murdering the brahmana -Bisharupa, the son of Tvastra which is written in our dharmashastra's (holy books).If someone violates the menstrual taboos the prosperity of the house will be in threat. In such houses guru gukhai (God) will never reside. A husband's life span will be in risk if his wife is not conscious about her dos and don'ts during periods.' (Age: 60, Educational qualification: Upto 10<sup>th</sup> standard )

Such talks express the degrading position of a menstruating women as

an inferior and cursed one who losses their own caste status and become an untouchable one during their periods. People fear to break the religious taboos as God will be offended. These kinds of believe that God will punish the offender is deeply ingrained in the minds of the girls from their childhood. Men folks want taboos to be observed by all women to control the dangerous flow of blood and religious teachings plays significant role in this context.

### **Protecting others from the dangerous flow of blood**

All married woman try to follow restriction with their husband with utter devotion due to the fear that deviation from the taboos may cause ill health of their husband. Husband even does not take anything from her wife's hand during her periods. They cook for the family, tries to do their work by own in those days for which they used to depend on their wives. One married man expresses his views in this regard as follows:

'Sleeping with my wife during her periods is like inviting diseases for me. This is our age old restrictions which must have some meaning behind. Although I am not aware of what is written in our religious books and what will exactly happen if someone breaks this taboos but I follow them as I have been observing this followed by others.' (Age- 30, Educational Qualification: Upto 10<sup>th</sup> standard, Occupation: Carpenter)

Women try their best to protect men from the possible contamination of impurity during her periods. Those who break such rules are remarked as ill cultured women and not only neglected by men but fellow women also show the same attitude towards them. One lady said:

'I never touch and sleep with my husband during my periods. I do not want to take any risk with his life. "*Ayukh komi jabo*" (His life span will be reduced). My mother-in-law told me this at the very first period after my marriage. Some woman in our village used to sleep with their husband. It's very disgusting. Such woman should not allow cooking in communal feast. I will never accept food from her hand. Earlier I used to sleep on the floor where a bed is made with straw in the ground. As my mother-in-law is getting old my husband uses to cook in those days. Sometimes I seek help from neighbor in cooking. All taboos except cooking and performing religious activities come to an end on the third day after the bath. In the morning I wash all my cloth and curtains and wash my house also. Then I take the purification bath by washing my hair too without which the *suwa* does not end. *Nijore prabitra jen lage haidina* (That day I feel purified.) Finally on the 5<sup>th</sup> day I enter to the kitchen as my bleeding ceases. Earlier I used to cook from the

7<sup>th</sup> day. But now it's not possible as my husband finds it very difficult to handle kitchen. It's always not possible to ask help from neighbors also. (Age:30, Educational qualification: Upto secondary level, Occupation: Housewife)

Menstruating women are considered as vulnerable to attacked by *bhut-pret* (evil spirits) for which they are restricted from moving here and there during periods. It is believed that evil spirits can smell the menstrual blood and therefore women are advised by elders not to leave their menstrual cloth outside during the night. Moreover menstrual cloth is believed to be useful for magical use. Thus the danger of menstruation is not only limited to the men but to the menstruating woman itself.

### **Goddesses' menstruation and observance of *Xaath***

In Assam women's menstruation is also related with the *Xaat/Ambubasi* held every year during the monsoon season that fall during the Assamese calendar month *Ahaar*. It is the celebration of the yearly menstruation of the Goddess Kamakhya in Kamakhya temple of Assam. Kamakhya temple is an eminent *saktipeeth* of India where a yoni like stone is worshipped over which a natural spring flows inside a cave. It last for four days and the door of the temple is closed for the first three days as it is believed that mother Kamakhya is going through her menstruation. During this period people are restricted from farming, plucking fruits from tress, performing religious ceremonies as mother earth is taking rest due to her menstruation. During *xaath* or *ambubasi* menstruating woman have to follow more strict taboos than her usual periods. She has to stick to her bed like her menarche seclusion. Her foot should not touch the ground as earth is considered impure and both the impurities should not intermix. Sut people perceives that inter cultural attitudes changed many rules and restriction related to menstruation. Old folks blames the new generation for cultural assimilation occurring due to the inter caste marriages. But taboos related to *xaath* are still followed by many where there are old people in the family. One old lady shared:

'When someone knows that her period will come during *xaath* she does all the preparation for her menstruation. She cooks her food by herself for those two days of *xaath* and places them in a raised platform near to her bed. During summer people used to preserve the boiled rice for two to three days without freezing simply by adding cold water which is popularly called as *poitabhat*. In those days she is not allowed to eat meat, fish, fruits and vegetables except potato. She consumes boiled food like her menarche period until the *xaath* ends. Widow women follow these taboos with more sincerity. During *xaath*, the mother earth is regarded as impure for which people avoid farming, tear anything in touch with earth like fruits

and vegetables and give rest to the earth. Now days, these kinds of taboos are not obeyed by most people. In our time the rules were very strict but good for us. Now our boys marry girls from outer caste or tribe who don't value our traditions.' (Age-75, E.Q. Illiterate, Marital status: Widow)

Such practices reflect the social construction of menstruation and the notion of purity and impurity in Hinduism where women during her cycles regarded as unholy, dirty and even goddess are not different from this. Mother earth is the sign of fertility like women and she also need rest like a menstruating woman during her periods and thus secluded from devotees.

### **Changing aspects of menstrual taboos among the Sut's**

Most of the women obey menstrual restriction as traditional and do not know exactly what is written in their holy books. They believe that misfortune will come to their life if they break those taboos. Moreover they perceive themselves impure for which they want to seclude themselves from the others. But for a working woman or a single woman in a nuclear family setting it's very difficult to obey all the taboos. Diverting from traditional norms also subjected to degrading social status to them. Such woman has to face social negligence for breaking the taboos. In such situation woman uses different means like telling lies, seeking help from others in household works to cope up with the social rigidity. One working lady who lives with her husband and six years old son shared her problems in maintaining her social status along with her work life due to the process of menstruation. She said:

'I have to go for work every morning and have to cook during my periods also. My husband sometimes assists me in some household work when he used to be free. I know that villagers talk about me and show their dissatisfaction in front of me. I used to tell lies when they asked me about observance of taboos.' (Age-35, Educational Qualification- B.A, Occupation- Health worker)

In joint family women shows more adherence to the menstrual taboos than the nuclear family. Elders want every taboo to be followed by the youngsters. Women get complete rest from the everyday household chores. But as people are moving towards the nuclear family people are also diverting from many traditional rules and restrictions. It may be because of unavoidable circumstances and also because of fewer restrictions from elders. Some respondents share their views as follows:

One widow who lives with her eight and six years old daughters said:

'Earlier when my in-laws were alive I have to follow many taboos during my periods. Now it's not possible to follow all the menstrual taboos. I give

importance to cleanliness during that time. I do all the household works and also cook meal for my family as my daughters are very young to substitute me in cooking. But I never cook for guests or elders as I feel guilty by doing so. It's not a big issue if I cook for me and my daughters but it's not good to serve guests in such state. I touch everything but try not to sit everywhere I never enter the prayer house and restrict my daughters too as they touch me. I never touch anyone except my daughters as others may follow the taboos with sincerity and I respect their sentiments. Some neighboring women criticize me for not following the taboos with sincerity. But I do not care for such criticism as I cannot engage my school going daughters in household chores and I also do not believe in all. But some taboos like not touching holy book, not entering to the temple etc. are fitted in my mind in such a manner that I cannot break them in any condition. Now a days, many sanitary products are available in the market which is very useful to maintain the hygiene. Therefore some taboos look unnecessary like not touching anyone or anything.' (Age-37, E.Q. H.S. passed, Occupation- Anganbadi worker)

One young lady who recently moving to her husband original home from his workplace setting narrated:

'Earlier it was not possible to follow any menstrual taboo except performing rituals as there was no one to help me in household work. But now as I have moved to my husband's house in village, it has become very tough to follow the taboos once again. Many village women points out my mistakes and also tease my mother-in-law. According to them as much as hygiene one maintains, she still remains unholy and untouchable during her period.' (Age- 25, Educational qualification-H.S. passed, Occupation- Housewife)

Newly menstruating school going girls are not so conscious about the menstrual taboos. They try to follow the restriction to satisfy the elders. But the college going girls show adherence to menstrual taboos and respect their tradition. Mothers of young girls used to be more conscious to keep their house away from the impurity. Surprisingly in some cases the cause behind absent from school is not lack of sanitary product or unavailability of toilet facilities but cultural taboos and myths. One school going girl said:

'My mom does not allow me to attend school for two days during menstruation due to the fear of contamination caused by mixing up with my friends. It is said that menstrual pain is contagious. During periods one should not cross through cow dung and the rope of a cow. Doing so one is inviting ill health for her.'" (Age-13, Educational Qualification- Studying in 7<sup>th</sup> standard).

There is a myth that if a menstruating woman travels by bus, motor cycle or any kind of vehicle it's not auspicious as Lord Bishwakarma resides in

motor vehicles. One respondent narrated:

‘Few years ago a picnic bus of our neighbor village had an accident. Many people were blaming a menstruating woman who was in the picnic group. But I used to travel during my period also. But I never got such misfortune except some personal discomfort. People are restricted from traveling and grooming around during periods. This restriction also might have some cause behind as she may be ashamed of possible leakage and also her body needs rest’. (Age-32, Educational Qualification-B.A. Occupation-Teacher)

Such kinds of attitudinal changes reflect the demands of present day life which is very different from the old days where women’s movements were limited to their household activities. Most of the married women avoid putting vermilion in their forehead until the third day of their menstruation as she considered herself impure during menstruation. Vermillion is the sign of a married Hindu woman and is considered very auspicious for her husband’s good health. But few respondents (5%) used to put vermilion during their periods also as they do not think that it can get impure by the menses. Thus younger Sut women are gradually becoming rational and practical instead of being blind- folded and superstitious about their cultural practices and modernity and changing pattern of family plays significant role in this regard.

### **The social functions of menstrual taboos and practices in Sut society**

The existence of menstrual taboos in Assamese Sut society can be viewed from the Structure Functional approach of Anthropological thought. Those who have formulated these kinds of practices in the remote history of mankind must have seen some social functions of them to maintain the peace and discipline in the society. The universal menstrual beliefs and taboos have some important social advantages and functions to play. The people believe that this kinds of social discipline in the form of taboos helps in maintaining the peace of their society which is advantageous for both women and the society. Prohibition and cultural practices around menstruations helps the society to protect the community people from the unhygienic substances of menstrual cycle or the so called impurity and also the women from the bodily weaknesses and vulnerability of being attacked by wild animals and evil spirits as they are believed as hungry of blood especially of menstrual blood. Restricting a woman during her periods from cooking, cleaning, farming, religious activities etc. gives women rest from daily physical activities which is much required in a traditional Assamese joint family setting where women have to be very devoted to her family and household social-religious ceremonies. In Balinese society where menstruating women are regarded as impure and when women’s menstruation coincided with a ritual ceremony is regarded as something wrong and bad luck but “usually people like menstruating” and become “Like a Raja”

as it gives them total rest from hectic schedules. (Pederson, 2002:308). In Sut society also married women possess same attitude as menstruation gives them enough rest from the household chores for three to seven days and scientifically also physical rest is much required in this time. Among the respondents traditionalist follows the menstrual taboos to the best of their effort but most of them do not know exactly the causes behind those practices. They follow them as their mother or elders had taught them to follow from their childhood. Modernist considered some menstrual taboos and myths as superstitions and useless but never think about the social advantages behind such practices. Coming of age rituals and taboos helps a girl to get acquainted with the norms and values of her own society and menarche rituals plays the most vital role in this regard where the feminine identity and role of a young girl is framed through the traditional practices. All these practices can be called as the mechanism to prepare a young girl as a socially accepted being which in fact clearly reflected through the terminology of menstruation as girls on her coming of age is marked as 'manuh huwa' means become human being as from now she will be count as an matured human being who is reproductively able and socially responsible. From that time her movements and activities will be remarked either good or socially advantageous or socially disadvantageous and sin for which she may also be punished by the society.

### **Conclusion**

In the Sut society menstrual rituals and taboos has become a vital part of their life. The notion of menstrual impurity is determined by mainly four social-cultural factors. Firstly, due to the age old concept of menstruation as the discharge of dirty blood from inside as mentioned in religious and cultural tales, a menstruating woman is made to follow numerous taboos throughout her menstruating life to maintain the religious purity of her society. Secondly, along with being pollutant, women have to follow the taboos for the protection of others, especially their men folks and the society as a whole. Such traditions shows the dominance of men in a patriarchal setting where she has to live the life of an inferior pollutant being every month during her periods. Thirdly, Women tries to follow the restrictions due to the fear that something wrong may happen or misfortunes may touch their life or they may be attacked by evil spirits. Such perception depicts the negative magical power of menstruation and associated taboos over a women's mind. Even menstrual blood is believed to have some magical power behind it which can be misused by enemy for magical purpose. Similar instance is stated by Frick in Xining, the capital of Chinghai where people use both menstrual blood and animal blood in magical practices and also as medicine (Frick, 1951). Fourthly, menstrual taboos are playing important social functions for maintaining the peace and discipline of the Sut people. It is regarded as a part of their culture as taught by their elders from the onset of menarche and this is to be respected and kept for maintaining their status and peace in their own society. Some of the menstrual taboos are

disappearing due to the demand of busy life schedule, attitudinal changes with modernity and other household conditions. Old people also think that marriages from outer caste are influencing their culture to a great extent and bringing changes. In comparison to joint family, women in a nuclear family setting show fewer adherences to menstrual taboo. But the strict taboos are followed by most of the women regardless of their household problems and this will be continued in Sut society. Women's position in their own society degrades with deviation from the taboos as norms and values of the society are associated with complex menstrual practices in an Assamese Sut society. Therefore, for a working lady or for a single woman in a nuclear setting menstruation sometimes become a challenge to maintain her social and cultural status and identity in her society.

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