

Religious-cultural construction of menstruation among purig and balti tribe of Kargil, Jammu & Kashmir

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Abstract

From both the social and medical perspectives, menstruation is often considered the central event of female puberty, as it signals the possibility of fertility. It is a vital maturational event of puberty in female adolescents; however unlike other pubertal changes that are gradual and continuous, menarche is a distinct event with a sudden onset. It is highly correlated with other pubertal characteristics and is, therefore, referred as a benchmark for sexual maturation. There are socio-cultural concepts of menstruation which shape its experience among the females experiencing it. Kargil is one of the most distant geographic locales of India, which is culturally unique in many ways. A sample of 320 adolescent girls and 100 mothers of Balti and Purig tribe of the region described the various taboos and restrictions they faced during their monthly menstrual cycle. These taboos can be classified as religious, cultural, dietary, physical restrictions and sexual taboos. The findings of the study highlight that the lives of these tribal females continues to be influenced by the cultural and religious construction. No deviation on these taboos is allowed as it is considered unacceptable. Menstruation is a topic for private consumption only and not to be referred to as on the public. There are no direct word for referring to menstruation and further all menstrual issues and material are to be hidden from others especially the male. If the males come to know about this, it is a cause of shame and embracement. Women have to silently deal with menstruation and have to keep their menstrual material secretly; and even have to dispose these off in the most secretive manner. The lives of women continue to be bound by these taboos.

Keywords: Menstruation, Tribals, Kargil, Taboos and restrictions

Introduction

Menarche and menstruation are part of a growing up female's life. As soon as the females attain puberty, one apparent reproductive indicator is menstruation. Young girls at their entry into adolescence have to face menstruation as a monthly and cyclic process. From experiencing menarche to later menopause, it is a constant physiological process which keeps occurring inside their bodies. Menarche is the first menstrual cycle, or first menstrual bleeding, in female humans. From both social and medical perspectives, it is often considered the central event of female puberty, as it signals the possibility of fertility. It is a vital maturational event of puberty in female adolescents; however unlike other pubertal changes that are gradual and continuous, menarche is a distinct event with a sudden onset. It is highly correlated with other pubertal characteristics and is, therefore, referred as a benchmark for sexual maturation (Jee, 2009) [9].

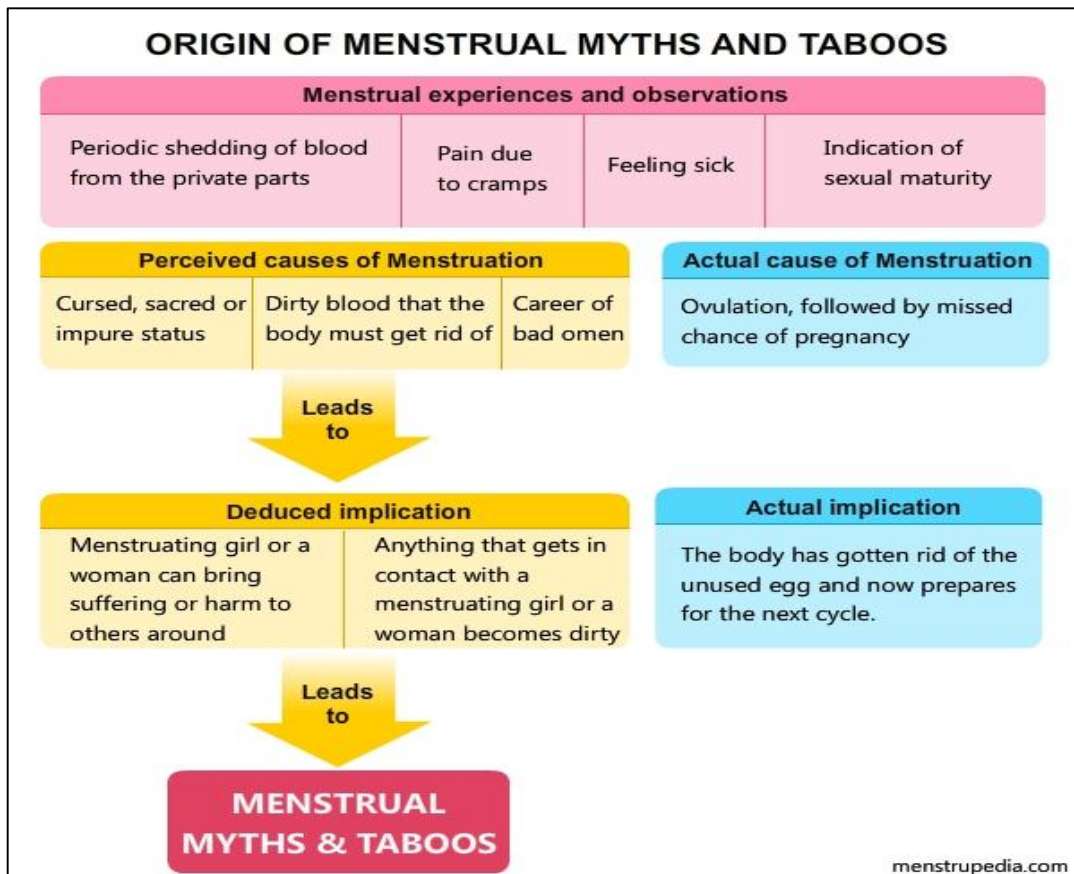
The socio-cultural practices of a society are what makes it unique and what gives it an identity. Medically, the starting of a girl's menstruation marks her change from a child to an adult, as it is an important transition but the cultural/religious practices decide its construction for a given culture. Different culture treats menarche in different ways. Some cultures visualize menarche as a crucial time in a girl's life and commemorate it in order to greet the girl in to the world of adulthood while other cultures consider menarche as just an unimportant physical occurrence. Historically, menarche has been celebrated with detailed menarche ritual. Girls' initiation

is not only about ceremonies, it is the whole time of puberty turning from girl into woman. Together girls learn what it means to be a woman. An important part of this process is learning from elder women. In some cultures there is another important aspect of initiation ceremony for girls a rejuvenation, rebirth of the whole community. There are few cultures where first blood is a cause for joy and womanhood a source of pride. There, girls receive presents and the whole community meets to feast, dance and celebrate new women in their tribe. However, not all the rituals were positive in nature. Among a Turkish tribe a girl would get a slap from her mother or any other woman who is present at the time the girl starts menstruating. The slap has been interpreted in different ways varying from a punishment due to menstruation; or a means of bringing blood and color back to the cheeks (Culpepper, 1991; Kissling, 1996; Milow, 1983) [2, 11, 14]. Most menstrual myths and taboos are derived from cultural and religious credentials and hence create anxiousness among females. Many communities world over have gone through centuries of myths and taboos that have created a thought of the female body which has continued to organise the lives of women and girls in modern society and this stems from the fact that it is not looked at as a natural occurrence but a socially constructed one. Religious teachings, cultural beliefs and traditional practices, have all played their role in the philosophy of stigmatising the menstruating woman (UNICEF, Kenya, 2008) [21]. Social and cultural factors influence the adjustment to menstruation and have an effect on the early menarcheal experience (Swenson

and Haven, 1987) [19]. Ten (2007) [20]. Kumar & Srivastava (2011) [12] reported that when women and girls are menstruating their mobility and behaviour are restricted or controlled, due to myths, misconceptions, superstitions and cultural and/or religious taboos. The myths and taboos make the menstrual experience worse for girls and they tend to lose their self-esteem further, limiting their full participation in educative, cultural and religious activities. Its indeed true that many of the females hinted at loathing being born female because of menstruation, especially when an accident like leaking of menstrual blood on clothes and letting out their 'secret', while males were not bothered by such embarrassing experiences. When school/college going girls go through such experiences they lose the courage to go on with their studies because they feel that life is being unfair to them. Globally, menstruating women are usually considered impure and unclean. Even though this cultural belief was not based in logic or science, it persists, continuing to be harmful for women and society in general. As menstruation is a normal physical process, from a healthcare perspective, it should be considered normal; women experiencing menstruation have the right to be treated as normal (Devkota, 2011) [4].

Historically, menstruation has, and continues to be used as justification for preventing girls and women from fully participating in public life, justifying control over their activities in the public arena in general and over their sexuality in particular. The view that monthly bleeding is a biological defect or a divine curse renders itself appropriately to a social system in which men control women's behaviour in a patriarchal regime that often 'subject women's bodies to more control than men's' (Shilling, 1993).

Many women in different parts of the world are treated badly just because she is menstruating and various studies have proved this. Almost always, there are social norms or unwritten rules and practices about managing menstruation and interacting with menstruating women. Some of these are helpful but others have potentially harmful implications. For example, in some cultures, women and girls are told that during their menstrual cycle they should not bathe (or they will become infertile), touch a cow (or it will become infertile), look in a mirror (or it will lose its brightness), or touch a plant (or it will die) (House *et al.* 2012) [18]. In Western Nepal, women status is lower than a dog's, because she is menstruating. Menstruation is dirty, and a menstruating girl is a powerful, polluting thing, a thing to be feared and shunned (Rose, 2014). Muslims in Malawi believed that women's reproductive blood was very dangerous. In Afghanistan menstruating girls and women are also prevented from sleeping next to other family members. In rural Kenya women on their periods are not even considered fit to go into a goats den or walk near livestock, and are not allowed to eat their meat or drink their milk (SOS, 2014) [18]. A recent study conducted by Diksha (2014) [5] reported that majority of women themselves believe that a menstruating woman in India is impure and can contaminate anything she touches. It was important to note that most of the people interviewed were not from villages, but urban Indian cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata, Bangalore and Hyderabad. All these reproductive-bleeding events had to be cleansed by ritual bathing before a woman could safely resume full social and spiritual life (Zulu, 2001) [22].



Keeping all the aforementioned data in mind, the current account endeavours to study some of the common menstrual beliefs and taboos faced by the females of Purig and Balti tribe of Kargil. Ladakh is divided into two main districts Leh and Kargil. Kargil District is situated at a distance of 205 Kms from Srinagar and 230 Kms from Leh. Kargil district comprises of nine blocks namely Sankoo, Chiktan, Shargol, Tesuru, G.M Pure, Zanskar, Drass, and Kargil. Presently there are around 157 villages in Kargil, out of which only 97 villages are electrified. The population of the district stands around 1, 23,000 of which 99% belong to Scheduled Tribe (Tourism department, Kargil). The main tribes in the area include Brogpas, Baltis, Purig, Shinas and Bodh (kargil.gov.in, 2010).

Purig Tribe

Much of present day Kargil district was once known as Purig. The name ‘Purig’ means ‘tube’ and refers to the tubular valleys that make up the inhabited parts of the region, Currently, the region called purig included the areas around Kargil town, the Suru Valley, Shakar Chiktan, Pashkyum, Bodh Kharbu and Mulbekh (Tourism Department Kargil, 2011)

Balti Tribe

The Balti is an ethnic group of Tibetan descent with some Dardic admixture, who live in the Gilgit–Baltistan region of Pakistan. In addition, smaller populations also exist intensively in the village of Hardas, Kaksar and shiliktsey of Kargil district, Jammu & Kashmir, India. The Balti language belongs to the Tibetan language family and is a sub-dialect of Ladakhi. Balti, Ladakhi and Purig are mutually intelligible (Rizvi, 2009) [17].

Menstruation among Purig and Balti tribe of Kargil is masked/marred by a number of belief, myths and taboos. A sample of 320 adolescent girls and 100 mothers described the various taboos and restrictions they faced during their monthly menstrual cycle. Broadly speaking the married and unmarried menstruating females of the selected tribes of Kargil faced the following taboos:

1. Religious taboos
2. Cultural taboos
3. Physical restriction/hygiene related taboos
4. Dietary taboo/preferences
5. Sexual taboos



Researches have proven that in many cultures a menstruating women’s status is extremely poor and such females tend to face humiliation and many unscientific taboos and restrictions. Females in Kargil also face many socio cultural restrictions and taboos.

1) Religious Taboos / Restrictions Related to Menstruation

Purig and Balti tribe from which the sample was selected are followers of Islam; hence all sample females are Muslim by religion. These females are further found to diligently follow Islamic rules and regulation during menstruation. Likewise other Muslim dominated parts of the world, Muslim females of Kargil District too followed some taboo or restriction. As per observations of Islamic laws these menstruating women are

seen as unclean and polluted. A study conducted in Kenya by UNICEF (2008) [21] reported that in Islam, a menstruating woman is considered vulnerable and polluted; therefore she could not pray, fast, or have sexual intercourse. Menstrual blood was najis (polluted), haram (very dirty), just as is the case of all other forms of blood, excrement, and reproductive fluids. In some Islamic traditions the jinn (evil spirit) is believed to be strongly attracted to menstrual blood. For these believers, anyone who sees or touches menstrual blood is ritually impure and vulnerable to malevolent spirits, and dire consequences are bound to occur. Blanchet (1987) [11] had also reported that in Bangladesh, menstrual blood is seen as the greatest of all pollution. Menstruating women must stay inside as much as possible; they are not allowed to prepare food or to

work in the rice fields. Sex (and sharing a bed with their partner) and praying or reading the Quran are prohibited during this period. Pednekar (2010) ^[16] also found that in India menstruating Muslim women in the most conservative of families are restricted from praying, touching the Quran, and must take a holy bath on the seventh day to purify their body.

The results of the present study reveal that, when the sample respondents were asked about the taboo/s or restriction/s which they faced during menstruation, all the respondents commonly stated that, they had to follow the various religious taboos/restrictions during menstruation. All menstruating females irrespective of their age or marital status had to completely follow these and there was no escape from these religious practices. Being a follower of Islam one has to follow all these religious practices otherwise one will not be considered as Muslim. Condemnation or disapproval of these practices is equivalent to a great sin. There was no scope of questioning these beliefs and hence they were followed sincerely from generation to generation. The religious taboos followed by the Purig and Balti women of Kargil include

- i) Taboo /restrictions on prayers (Namaz and Quran)
- ii) Taboo /restrictions on visiting any Holy places (Mosque/Dargha)
- iii) Taboo /restrictions on observance of Roza during Ramadan
- iv) Taboo or restrictions on sexual activities during menstruation

i) Taboo or restrictions on prayers (Nemaz and Quran)

According to sample Muslim respondents of Kargil, the menstruating women were not supposed to offer 5 times prayers (Nemaz), nor they could recite or touch the holy book 'Quran'. These activities were strictly prohibited and hence were followed in earnest. However, some of the females especially the elder ones reported that they could recite the contents of Holy Quran but without touching the verses (Aayat) of Quran. Further, according to them if a menstrual cycle lasts more than 10 days then it will not be considered as haiz (menstruation) but rather will be considered as 'Nafaz' in which one can perform 'Namaz', in fact Namaz becomes compulsory (Wajib).

All these rules and regulation about menstruation were enshrined in their religious book 'Resala' and 'Toffa-ul-Awam' which they followed sincerely. However, the respondents shared that during menstruation; woman is permissible to live in the home as usual and to eat and drink with the family and can even attend any social gathering. In short, she can perform all other acts of social life as an average woman. She can also continue to wear clothes that she wore during menstruation as long as there is no blood stain on them. Oche *et al* (2012) ^[15] also noted found that menstruating women are not allowed to read the Arab Quran but can read from the translations in other languages.

ii) Taboo / restrictions on visiting any holy places (Masjid, Mazar and Imam bada)

Females of Kargil reported that they were strictly advised not to enter any Holy place during their monthly cycle. It is even recommended that a menstruating women should keep a distance of 100 meters from the Mosque since according to them menstruating women are 'impure' and 'dirty', it is believed that the shrine or Holy place will also become impure due to her presence. However, during the month of Mohram

(Matam) menstruating women can attend Mohram gathering in Imam Bada (community Hall for religious preaching) to listen the 'Khatbas' and 'Hadith' (religious stories) which are delivered by Imam/sheikh/Aagas or Molanies (female religious preachers). But at the same time cannot touch any religious article such as Tabud (imaginary coffin of 'Imam Hussain', the holy profit 'pbuh' grandson); Zulzana (a horse that display in the rally of moharam), any written or engrave verse of Quran and Alam (Islamic flag) etc. However no restriction is imposed on the presence of menstruating female such as Eid -ul-Adha or Eid -ul-Fitr. She can participate fully in such activities as per her desires. The practice of not entering the holy places is also commonly seen among Hindu's in India. Menstruating women irrespective of her age is not supposed to enter a temple or touch any religious article or books.

iii) Taboo /restrictions on observance of Roza during Ramadan

One of the religious practices surrounding menstruation is the restriction on observance of Roza during the holy month of Ramadan. Menstruating women who have already started observing Roza during Ramadan, and then starts menstruating will have to discontinue the same. If she wants to complete the left over or missed fast then she may fast later during the year to make up these lost days. In general such women are not allowed to offer any prayers during menstruation because of the belief that prayers from an impure person have no outcome or reimbursement. As explained earlier if a period last more than 10 days then it will not be considered as haze (menstruation) it will be considered as nafaz in which one can keep the fast (Roza) in fact Fast becomes compulsory (wajib) by following the same condition at the time of performing Namaz as stated in previous section.

Most of the women further elaborated by saying that "we don't know why menstruation blood is considered as impure and why we can't offer prayers during menstruation but our religious preachers that is, the Sheikh and Aaga and the elders women of our family guided us by saying that it was directed and commanded by our Allah and written in our holy book Quran and religious book Tofa-tul-Awam or Resala and we all have to follow our Allah's command as we believe in Islam". In order to reinstate her in the religious context or for her to be considered religiously acceptable, two conditions are laid down:

- a. Menstrual blood should stops.
- b. The woman is obligatory to perform a purifying or spiritual bath called as 'Ghusl'. At the end of her menstrual cycle usually on the 7th day of her period a women by reciting prayers (dua) known as Ghusl -e- haiz and undertakes a 'Ghusl' which also includes washing the entire body, that is from the head to toe. No part of the body should remain dry; the water should touch every parts of the body. If the woman is wearing nail paint during periods it should be removed first before bathing otherwise Ghusul will not be accepted as per Islamic law because nail paint protects the nails to touch water properly. The Resala (Islamic Book) has complete reference to the details of this 'Ghusal -e- Haiz'. This physical purification allows her to resume prayer and fasting. After bathing, she can apply henna to her hands, feet and hair, if she wants. Some of the elder females of tribal communities of Kargil remarked that Islam doesn't

believe in physically taxing a menstruating female with fasts and praying. In order to give relief to already weak and vulnerable women, Islam prohibits observance of Roza during the menstrual cycle.

iv) Taboo or restrictions on sexual activities during menstruation

All the participants claimed that, since they were followers of Islam, sexual intercourse of a wife with her husband is strictly prohibited during her menstrual cycle. However, Islam allowed the man to eat, sit and lead a normal life with his menstruating wife. The only thing he is not allowed to do is to have sexual intercourse with her for seven days (beginning when the bleeding starts). These laws are derived from the Holy Qur'an (2:222). The Qur'an clearly states the reason for this prohibition, which is that menstruation, is adha (a harmful thing). Allah says: "They ask thee concerning women's courses. Say: They are hurt and polluted, so keep away from women in their courses, and do not approach them until they are clean. But when they have purified themselves, ye may approach them in any manner, time, or place ordained for you by Allah. For Allah loves those who turn to Him constantly and He loves those who keep themselves pure and clean." Ayah: 222 Chapter 2 Baqara. "Your wives are as a tilth unto you; so approach your tilth when or how ye will; but do some good act for your souls beforehand; and fear Allah. And know that ye are to meet Him (in the Hereafter), and give (these) good tidings to those who believe. Verse 223." The Quran. The respondents further illustrated that according to their religious belief, if a woman gets involved in sexual intercourse during menstruation and conceives, and then the child will not be accepted as legitimate child in the society as per religion. A menstruating woman hence again is visualized as unclean and polluted, so distance from her has to be maintained by her husband.

Islam acknowledges the other harmful effects, for women as well as men: "Say: It is an adha (a harmful thing for a husband to have a sexual intercourse with his wife while she is having her menses), so let women alone at such time and go not in unto them till they are cleansed." (Al-Baqarah: 222).

The aforementioned account on the religious taboos imposed on menstruating females reveals that among both Purig and Balti tribes of Kargil, strict religious ethics related to menstruation are available. Islamic laws have strict does and don'ts related to menstruation, which are unquestioningly accepted by all females, there is no scope of deviation or even questioning the authenticity of the religious claims. Females of all ages have to necessarily follow these religious restrictions. Menstrual blood is considered impure and dirty and hence the menstruating female is also considered to be polluted. Based on this conceptualization menstruating women/girl cannot touch this Holy book, couldn't enter the holy places and couldn't observe Roza's. However, she can recite the verse of Holy Quran if known to her by heart; she could participate in receiving religious summons and could also complete her Rozas during other times across the year. This highlights that even though there are many religious restrictions among the females of argil but at the same time there are alternatives offered as well within the religious framework itself.

2) Cultural Taboos/ Restrictions during Menstruation

Even though culture and religion are two elements which are

highly correlated with each other, however, there are many practices which may continue to be followed for reasons other than religion. Females of Kargil district faced some restrictions/taboo's owing to cultural factors which exist without a direct religious base. These practices related to menarche and menstruation are discussed as follows:

Most women who follow cultural restrictions were not concerned with modern scientific outlook, it is neither written in any of their book nor they were sure that these practices are scientific in nature, but still they were following these practices because they were told to do so by the elder females of their families and the trend keeps on continuing from generation to generation. Probably because these are followed since long therefore these had become part and parcel of the social system. Even though there was no any strict punishment to the female not following these but these are associated with social stigma. It is considered as a matter of shame and embarrassment in the society if one does not follow these cultural taboos. Even if girl/woman is suspicious about the authenticity or applicability of these taboos, they continue to follows these because it was a symbol of social conformity and social acceptance. Many of these cultural practices and taboos do not have any scientific base to its credit nor is there any religious reference to these but the taboos continues to be passed from one generation to another. Majority of the sample adolescent girls reported that they partially followed most of these cultural taboos/restrictions as they didn't find any logic behind in these restrictions. Majority of young girls secretly disclosed that they didn't let their elder females to know that they are not following the culture taboos/restriction. As per their own personal choice they indulged in bathing, eating and not avoiding of certain foods, disposals of used materials etc. When their mothers and grandmothers found their girls following these cultural taboos/restrictions they sometime got angry but on other occasion, didn't strictly instruct them to follow these choice.

Since many of these cultural restrictions are not harmful and if a woman does not like to follow then, it is not a punishable act by the society. Common cultural taboos followed related to menstruation among tribals of Kargil district

- i) Taboos/restrictions to openly discuss about menstruation
- ii) Taboos/restrictions on buying of sanitary pads
- iii) Taboos/restrictions on public demonstration of menstruation especially in front of males

i) Taboo/restrictions to openly discuss about menstruation:

Not surprisingly, there is a strong taboo against menstruation being talked about openly in the public. Women of selected tribes of Kargil reported that "menstruation is a topic that is not be discussed openly as it is seen as a matter of shame and embarrassment". No public discussion on the matter is allowed ever. Further, talking about such issues in front of males is all the more forbidden., they also added by saying that "basically no women speaks about menstruation in front of male member ever". It was also found that all the respondents treated menstruation as a private matter and tried to keep it a secret especially from the male member of the family. In other words the state of menstruation was never acknowledged publically, it is something personal for a woman. So, young females of these tribes are socialized since their teen age years to not to discuss or mention about menstruation in front of male members. "Menstruation is one of those things you know, everyone

knows about it but no one is allowed to talk about it. Even boys know about this and that's why most of the boys giggle and laugh during biology class when the topic of menstruation comes up" reported many young girls of Kargil.

Silence on menstruation and related issues have been maintained for long. Females experiencing this probably never had the platform to talk about such issues and they were brought up in an environment where asking questions was not welcomed, even today it is not acceptable to question the cultural beliefs and practices.

ii) Taboo/restrictions on buying of sanitary pads

In olden days there was no concept of readymade sanitary pads so the older generation had no experience of buying sanitary pads from market. When the mothers and girls respondents, who use readymade sanitary pads were asked if there is any taboo to buy sanitary pads without being seen by men other than the shopkeeper they reported that there is no taboo on this, but they mostly preferred not to buy this material from male shop owners because they felt shy and uneasy. Since there is shame associated with menstruation and it is to be hidden from males so they could never ask a male member of the family to buy sanitary towels or tampons. They mostly managed to arrange it as their own or in case of young girls their elder sisters, mother or elder female of the family arranged it for her. Nevertheless, there are also some girls who reported that they don't feel shy and uneasy to buy sanitary pads from a male shopkeeper and frankly asked the male shopkeeper for a sanitary pad. This again indicates the changing practices among the growing adolescent girls of these tribal communities.

iii) Taboo/restrictions on public demonstration of menstruation especially in front of males

Similarly all the respondents across the three generation from both the tribes agreed that it is very embarrassing for a female when a man finds out that a woman is having her period. Few women explicitly said they their daughter had been told to maintain silence during their periods. If required they were told to pretend in front of male family members to be keeping Rozas during Ramadan month. Since girls of Kargil are socialized in such a way that menstruation is a hidden issue, so all the respondents thought that it is embarrassing when a man finds out that a woman is having her period whether by some accidental situation, like spoiling of dress, not praying, not going to religious places etc. In these entire situations the other females of the family helped a menstruating female in hide the matter.

The cultural visualization of menstruation is one of a 'shameful act' that is to be dealt with only in private. The news of menstruation is never to be made public whatever the reason or situation. When females are not allowed to discuss about issues related to menstruation among themselves it is nearly unimaginable to consider the knowledge of males about it. A menstruating woman has to hide it from the eyes and knowledge of all males around her. For this if required she can lie or use disguise. Cultural taboos of the selected tribes puts a control on all females never to acknowledge or talk about it as if males come to know about it, then it would bring them embarrassment and shame. Even buying sanitary material from male shopkeeper is not acceptable. Hence, in short the results revealed that menstruation is one process surrounded by strict cultural taboo of non-disclosure and non-sharing.

3) Physical Activities or Hygiene Related Taboos/Restrictions during Menstruation

Certain taboos related to physical hygiene were also noted among the tribals of Kargil. These are described as follows.

- i. Taboo/restrictions on applying Henna (Mehandi)
- ii. Taboo/restrictions on Bathing or swimming
- iii. Taboo/restrictions on open display of menstrual material.
- iv. Taboo/restrictions on disposal of used material in open field

i) Taboo/restrictions on applying Henna (Mehandi)

It was also found that majority of the females of Kargil were also advised against apply henna during menstruation. Culturally, applying of henna during menstruation is "Makrooh" means, if the advice or recommendation is followed then it is beneficial (Swaf) from religion point of view, but if one doesn't follow this practice then also there is no sin or loss attached. There is no religious reference point for this taboos but it was commonly believed practice of the region. The only exception to this rule was if the menstrual cycle and marriage date clash then the bride can apply henna or otherwise she has to wait for 7 days to get over with her menstrual cycle and after the customary purifying bath she can apply henna to her hands, feet and hair, if she desires. However some females of these tribes reported that there is a strict restriction on applying henna during menstruation because if one applies henna during menstruation her body is will remain impure till the colour of henna fades away. That's why they don't prefer to apply henna during periods.

ii) Taboo/restrictions on Bathing or swimming

It was also found that there was no religious taboo related to bathing during menstruation however majority of females did not prefer to take bath due to the climatic condition. The women reported that bathing during menstruation due to a harsh and cold climate of Kargil becomes quite difficult as there were always chances of back pain and abdominal pain because of use of cold water. So, the mothers and others elder females of the family advised the menstruating female not to take bath during their period. However, some females also held the belief that bathing causes stoppage of menstrual blood. This finding is in unison with a cross sectional study carried in Mansoura, Egypt by Gilanya *et al* (2005), reporting the belief that bathing during menstruation is to be avoided. It was also believed by the respondents that taking a cold shower retains blood and also causes cramps, while a hot shower would increase its flow even in summer season also. From Saudi Arabia the same study reported the widespread superstition that bathing during menstruation is painful, or it stops blood from flowing. For similar reasons older generation females of Kargil did not favour bathing during menstruation. They found it unusual and amusing to take bath during menstruation as there were no traditions of bathing during menstruation in olden times. Some older women further reported that, "now the younger generation does not like to follow this belief as this practice is not religiously connected so it becomes easy to bunk this belief. Some girls of our community like to take bath during periods in summer especially when they feel hot or unhygienic and that's too okay, it their own wish". This highlighted that with changing times bathing practices during menstruation have undergone some change at least.

iii) Taboo/restrictions on open display of menstrual material

Again washing and drying of protective clothes or material in an open place is a cultural taboo therefore females always wash their menstrual stained clothes in secluded places either in the river, canal or in locked bathroom without being seen by others, in some hidden places, away from everyone's sight, All menstruation related articles are to be hidden away. Storing of such things without being seen by others is a top most priority. The females reported that, "our mothers and sister used to say that if our father or brother sees our menstrual products specially the menstrual stained cloth, it's a big sin. Therefore sanitary protection materials are carefully hidden for this fear.

iv) Taboo/restrictions on disposal of used material in open field

Taboos were also noted on the disposal of used material in open field specially without washing them properly or without burning of used material. There was a commonly held belief that if one throws the used material in the open field without washing it properly then it is equivalent to throwing of newly born illegitimate child (Nallu), it is further considered that much sin. Similarly, burning of any menstrual stained cloth or pad is also regard as great sin in Kargil, therefore if the females want to dispose off the menstrual material; they usually placed the cloth or pad under the big rock or bolder in the river so that it doesn't float in the river but rather gets decomposed under that rock. Similar restrictions are practised in other countries like in Bolivia, where girls do not discard their sanitary products by burning, because blood is an extension of themselves, so they throw them or bury them. In Nigeria, women also do not burn their sanitary materials because they believe burning causes cancers and infertility; because you therefore were destroying something from the womb (Mahon, 2010). And in Tanzania, proper disposal is required by burning because if others saw your blood, then they were able to curse you (Kivuvani, 2013) ^[10]. But contrary to these practices cross-sectional study of Sokoto, Nigeria reported the belief that menstrual blood can attract witches who use it in black magic rituals, if not disposed of properly. Hence it is believed that used pads must be burnt Oche *et al.* (2012) ^[15]. However, in the two selected tribes of Kargil burning of used material wasn't practiced. It was mandatory for the females to wash the sanitary material before disposal. Probably because of this young girls even washed the readymade sanitary pads before disposing them off. Where ever the source of running water say a river or a canal were available used material was disposed there, or in other cases females would bury them in soil or place them under heavy rocks on the hills or mountains. All this as culturally taught had to be done in complete private, away from the eyes of others.

The account on the taboos/restrictions faced by the Purig and Balti women of Kargil points out that even simple activities such as bathing, applying henna, using, storage and disposal of material are also governed by several taboos. Though no religious reference to bathing was found, yet it was uncommon for menstruating females to bath according to their own wish. The concept of impurity is so closely associated with menstruation, which a female applying henna during her periods continues to remain polluted till the colour of henna fades off. Further, the construction of menstruation as secret

affair also leads it to be phenomenon not to be acknowledged publicly. All menstrual material is to be hidden from others especially the males. Even disposal of such material is to be done in complete secrecy as otherwise the female is committing a sin. These all point out to the socio-cultural-construction of menstruation is an unclean, impure and disliked process on which heavy shadows of secrecy are to be maintained.

4) Dietary Taboo during Menstruation

Avoidance of certain foods during the time of menstruation was also seen among some females of Kargil district. Females were advised or recommended by their elders to avoid sour and cold foods during periods. Majority of respondents reported that though this practice is recommended but most of them did not bother to follow this practice any longer.

No doubt that all these restrictions were implemented on all females who are menstruating but it was also found that majority of females from Kargil district were unable to give explanation behind various practices and taboos associated with menstruation. They just follow it because were asked to do so by their mothers, grandmothers, sisters and their religious preachers (Sheikh and Aagas).

Conclusion

An analysis into the findings of the present study highlight that even though menstruation is an important physiological process that all healthy females undergo in their life time, yet even today it is governed by many socio cultural taboos/restrictions. Females of Purig and Balti tribe of Kargil visualize menstruation as a phenomenon determined by religious and cultural constructs. Islam has a profound role to play in constructing concepts related to menstruation. The two religious books namely 'Resala' and 'Tofa-ul-Awam'; have reference to many prohibition related to religious activities by menstruating women. Both religiously as well as culturally, menstruation is seeing as unclean and impure and a menstruating female is considered polluted. In view of this conceptualization such female is prohibited from touching the Holy Quran, entering the shrine/dargha and also restricted from observing Roza's. Further a menstruating married women is also forbidden from having any sexual relation with her husband, as it is a religious sin and unacceptable. A menstruating female can however, become pure only after the holy bath and hence can resume with any religious activity henceforth.

Within the selected tribes, menstruation is a topic for private consumption only and not to be referred to as on the public. There are no direct word for referring to menstruation and further all menstrual issues and material are to be hidden from others especially the male. If the males come to know about this, it is a cause of shame and embracement. Women have to silently deal with menstruation and have to keep their menstrual material secretly; and even have to dispose these off in the most secretive manner. This all point to the fact, that among the Muslim tribes of Kargil, menstruation is a shameful and embarrassing process which makes a woman unclean and dirty. She has to conform to these taboos because it is socially and religiously acceptable and hence no deviations are permitted what so ever.

Even the young adolescent girls receiving education continue to follow these religious and cultural practices. The basic

assumptions behind these restrictions and taboos have long been forgotten and replaced by unquestionable faith and allegiance. Divergence on these constructs is not permitted because then it is seen as a symbol of defiance to the local culture. Though some of the age old practices have been discarded by the youngsters of the current generation yet most of these continue to be prevalent. All this indicates that among the selected tribal group today also menstruation continues to be clouded by many strict socio cultural taboos and restrictions. There is a need to forego those practices which have lost their relevance in the modern times and those which have been followed need to be understood in context of their utility and efficacy.

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