



Rituals of Silence: Menstruation, Stigma and Social Control in Agonda, South Goa, India

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Abstract

Menstruation is a natural biological phenomenon, yet it continues to be surrounded by a wide range of traditions, taboos, and socio-cultural meanings that shape how it is experienced and understood in society. The present study examines menstruation as a socio-cultural construct in Agonda village, South Goa, with particular focus on Hindu women and their lived experiences. The research adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach, using in-depth interviews, observation, and participant observation to understand how menstrual practices are embedded within religious beliefs, family traditions, and social expectations. The study explores the various religious, social, economic, physical, personal, and non-religious functions associated with menstruation and critically analyses the myths, superstitions, fears, and logics that influence people's attitudes toward this natural process. It also investigates the concept of 'agency' by examining whether women follow these practices willingly or under social pressure. The findings reveal that although menstruation is recognised as a natural and essential biological process, it is socially constructed as impure, leading to restrictions that regulate women's behaviour. The study highlights the tension between tradition and change, as women increasingly question these practices while still being constrained by deeply internalised norms. It emphasizes the urgent need for awareness, open dialogue, and social transformation to normalise menstruation and dismantle stigma.

Keywords: Menstruation, Agonda, Taboo, Gender, Culture, Ethnography.

Introduction

Menstruation, while biologically universal, is socially and culturally constructed in ways that profoundly shape women's experiences across different societies. Rather than being treated as a neutral physiological process, menstruation is embedded within symbolic systems that assign meanings of purity, impurity, sacredness, and danger. In many parts of India, menstruation is not openly discussed but instead exists within a framework of silence, secrecy, and restriction. These social meanings transform menstruation into a regulated experience, where women's bodies are controlled through cultural norms, religious beliefs, and family expectations.

From a sociological standpoint, menstruation provides an important lens through which one can examine the intersection of gender, power and culture. The regulation of menstruation reflects broader patterns of patriarchy, where women's bodies are subjected to surveillance and control. The restrictions imposed during menstruation, such as exclusion from religious activities or domestic spaces, are not merely ritualistic but are indicative of deeper structures of inequality and symbolic classification. These practices reinforce the idea that the female body is inherently impure or polluting, thereby legitimising forms of exclusion and marginalisation.

Agonda village in South Goa offers a unique socio-cultural context for exploring these dynamics. While the village has

undergone significant transformation due to tourism, globalisation, and increasing access to education, traditional beliefs and practices continue to persist. This coexistence of modern influences and traditional norms creates a complex social environment where menstrual practices are both challenged and sustained. The study of menstruation in such a setting allows for an understanding of how cultural continuity and change operate simultaneously.

The present study seeks to explore how menstruation is perceived, practiced and negotiated among women in Agonda. It aims to understand the roles of religion, family, and society in shaping menstrual practices and to examine the extent to which women exercise agency in accepting, modifying, or resisting them. Additionally, the study seeks to uncover the fears, myths, and superstitions that sustain these practices despite increasing awareness about menstruation as a natural process.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The study of menstruation has generated significant scholarly attention, particularly in anthropology, sociology, and feminist studies. Early anthropological research documented the prevalence of menstrual taboos across cultures, noting that while specific practices vary, the underlying themes of restriction, exclusion, and symbolic meanings of pollution remain consistent across societies.^{1,2}

Menstrual practices often involve isolation, dietary restrictions, and prohibitions on participation in religious or social activities, reflecting broader cultural constructions of the body and impurity¹.

In the Indian context, menstruation is closely linked to religious beliefs, particularly within Hinduism, where the concept of ritual purity plays a central role. Women are often restricted from entering temples, cooking food, or participating in religious ceremonies during menstruation. These practices are justified through religious narratives but are also deeply intertwined with cultural norms and social expectations that regulate women's roles and behaviours^{3,4}. Such restrictions reflect the broader social organisation of purity and pollution embedded within kinship and gender relations in Indian society⁴.

Scholars have also highlighted the role of silence and secrecy in perpetuating menstrual stigma. The lack of open discussion about menstruation contributes to misinformation and reinforces negative attitudes toward the female body⁵. The UNICEF guidance on menstrual health and hygiene states that girls, in particular, often experience confusion, shame, and fear due to inadequate knowledge and limited support systems, which further internalize the stigma associated with menstruation⁶.

Recent research indicates that education and awareness are gradually transforming attitudes toward menstruation. However, deeply embedded cultural beliefs continue to influence practices, particularly in rural areas. There remains a gap between scientific understanding and social practice, as individuals may intellectually recognize menstruation as a natural biological process while continuing to adhere to traditional norms due to social pressure and cultural conditioning^{7,8}. Despite extensive research, there is limited ethnographic work focusing on specific local contexts such as Agonda village. This study contributes to the existing literature by providing a detailed, context-specific analysis of menstrual practices and their socio-cultural meanings, particularly in relation to women's lived experiences, fear, and agency.

The sociological understanding of menstruation can be enriched through several theoretical perspectives that explain how cultural meanings and power structures shape bodily experiences. The concept of purity and pollution, as articulated by Mary Douglas, provides a foundational framework for analysing menstrual taboos. According to Douglas, societies maintain order by classifying certain elements as pure or impure, and anything that disrupts this order is considered polluting¹. Menstruation, being associated with bodily discharge, is often categorized as impure, leading to the exclusion of menstruating women from sacred and social spaces. Michel Foucault's notion of disciplinary power further deepens this analysis by explaining how individuals internalize social norms and regulate their own behaviour⁵.

In the context of menstruation, women often adhere to restrictions not because they are externally enforced but because they have been socialized into accepting them as natural and necessary. This internalization of norms leads to self-regulation, in which women discipline their own bodies in accordance with societal pressures and expectations.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus is also relevant in understanding the persistence of menstrual practices. As Bourdieu describes it, habitus operates as 'a system of durable, transposable dispositions' that organises everyday practice without conscious intention. Menstrual restrictions in Agonda function in precisely this way: women rarely report active belief in the doctrine of impurity, yet the practices structure their daily lives as if they were natural⁹.

Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach to explore the lived realities of women in Agonda village. Ethnography is particularly suited for this research as it allows for an in-depth understanding of cultural practices and meanings within their natural context, emphasizing everyday lived realities and social interactions¹⁰. The study focuses primarily on ten Hindu women, as they constitute the primary group practicing traditional menstrual rituals in the village. Data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and non-participant observation. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing respondents to share their experiences and perspectives freely while also addressing specific themes related to menstrual practices. Participant observation enabled the researcher to gain insights into everyday practices and interactions within households, while non-participant observation provided additional context regarding ritual practices and social dynamics. Such qualitative methods are essential for understanding how power, norms, and bodily practices are reproduced within everyday life¹¹.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select respondents from different age groups and socio-economic backgrounds. This ensured a diversity of perspectives and experiences, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the issue. The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis, identifying recurring social markers and themes such as purity and impurity, fear, social conditioning, and resistance. These themes reflect broader structures of gendered power and symbolic domination within society¹².

Results and Discussion

The findings of the study reveal that menstruation in Agonda is deeply embedded in a complex network of cultural beliefs, religious practices, and social norms. One of the most prominent themes that emerges is the perception of menstruation as a state of impurity.

Restrictions during menstruation in Agonda's Hindu households typically encompass three distinct domains: temple entry is prohibited, participation in pujas and other domestic religious rites is suspended, and the preparation of food particularly cooking for the household is forbidden. These restrictions are justified through the belief that menstruation contaminates sacred spaces and objects, reflecting a broader cultural framework that associates bodily processes with impurity. At the same time, the study reveals significant variation in menstrual practices across households. These practices are not determined solely by religion, caste, or locality but are shaped by individual family traditions. Each household has its own set of rules and expectations for women during menstruation. This indicates that menstrual practices operate at a micro-social level, where family norms play a crucial role in shaping behaviour.

The celebration of first menstruation (menarche) emerges as a significant cultural practice marking a girl's transition from girlhood to womanhood. However, this celebration is followed by the imposition of monthly restrictions, creating a contradiction where menstruation is both celebrated and stigmatized. While the initial celebration acknowledges the biological significance of menstruation, the subsequent restrictions reinforce its association with impurity.

Fear plays a central role in sustaining menstrual practices. Women often express fear of divine punishment, social exclusion, and family disapproval if they do not adhere to traditional norms. This fear is deeply internalized and shapes their behaviour even when they recognize these beliefs as irrational. The study reveals that women continue to follow restrictions not necessarily because they believe in them but because they fear the consequences of non-compliance.

The internalisation of these norms is evident in the way women themselves enforce menstrual practices. Having been socialized into these practices from a young age, they accept them as part of their everyday life. The influence of older generations is particularly significant, as women often replicate the practices they have observed in their mothers and grandmothers. This intergenerational transmission of norms ensures the continuity of menstrual taboos.

Despite the persistence of traditional practices, the study also identifies emerging patterns of resistance and change. Some women have begun to question the validity of menstrual restrictions and are gradually modifying or rejecting them. However, this resistance is often subtle and negotiated within the constraints of family and social expectations. Women may choose to ignore certain restrictions privately while publicly conforming to norms to avoid conflict.

The role of education and awareness is particularly significant in shaping attitudes toward menstruation. Women who are exposed to awareness programs and educational initiatives demonstrate a more scientific understanding of menstruation

and are more likely to challenge traditional beliefs. They also play an important role in spreading awareness and promoting positive attitudes toward menstruation within their communities. At the same time, menstruation remains a subject of silence and discomfort. It is rarely discussed openly, particularly in interactions with men. This silence reinforces stigma and prevents the dissemination of accurate information. The way menstruation is represented in media and everyday conversations further reflects this discomfort, as it is often discussed indirectly or avoided altogether.

This study highlights the complex interplay between culture, religion, and power in shaping menstrual practices. Menstruation, though a natural biological process, is transformed into a socially regulated experience through cultural meanings and symbolic classifications. The persistence of menstrual taboos can be understood through the concept of cultural reproduction, where practices are transmitted across generations and become deeply embedded in everyday life. The study also underlines the role of patriarchal structures in regulating women's bodies. By constructing menstruation as impure, societies justify the exclusion of women from important social and religious domains. This reinforces gender inequality and limits women's autonomy. At the same time, the study reveals that women are not passive recipients of these norms but actively negotiate and sometimes resist them.

The emerging patterns of change observed in the study suggest that menstrual practices are not static but evolving. Education, awareness, and exposure to new ideas are enabling women to question traditional norms and assert greater agency. However, this process of change is gradual and uneven, as deeply embedded cultural beliefs continue to exert a strong influence.

Conclusion

The traditions related to menstruation vary widely within Hindu families, not necessarily determined by caste, religion, or locality, but by individual household practices. Common restrictions include avoiding religious places and activities, reflecting the belief that menstruation is impure in contrast to the purity associated with divinity. Although menstruation is biologically natural, it is socially constructed as impure, leading to the exclusion of women from religious participation. The celebration of first menstruation marks a significant life transition, yet it is followed by recurring restrictions that confine women within taboos. All women interviewed for the study reported practicing some form of menstrual restrictions. Despite recognizing menstruation as a natural phenomenon and an important part of a woman's life, they continue to follow these practices due to deeply embedded fear instilled since childhood. This fear includes concerns about divine curses, harm to family members, social rejection, and dishonour. These fears play a crucial role in sustaining these traditions.

Many women acknowledge that these practices are irrational and unethical, yet they find it difficult to abandon them due to long-standing social conditioning. The continuity of these practices across generations reinforces their legitimacy, making resistance challenging. However, a significant number of women express a desire to discontinue these traditions and prevent their transmission to future generations. Some have already begun to resist, either openly or privately. Women involved in awareness programs and research initiatives demonstrate more positive attitudes toward menstruation and actively work to spread knowledge and challenge taboos. They emphasize the importance of understanding menstruation scientifically and addressing the physical and mental well-being of women. Despite these efforts, menstruation continues to be a subject of discomfort and silence in society, particularly in interactions with men.

Menstruation is thus a natural and essential biological process that cannot be controlled or stopped by human beings. There is an urgent need to overcome stigma, promote awareness, especially in elementary schools, and create an environment where menstruation can be discussed openly without shame or judgment. Recognising menstruation as a natural phenomenon rather than a curse is essential for achieving gender equality and social progress.

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