

MENSTRUAL MYTHS AND TABOOS IN INDIA-A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW AND STRATEGIES TO ERADICATE THEM

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Abstract : Menstruation – a very common and natural biological process that is unique to girls. In India, it has been always surrounded by some base-less, untrue and unscientific myths and taboos that have immense negative impact on emotional, socio-cultural educational, lifestyle and most importantly physical health of girls and women. Limited knowledge and understanding about puberty and menstruation, reproductive health are the main obstructions to address those taboos and misconception. Hence, a holistic strategic approach is needed to be followed to combat these issues. The current paper discussed about menstruation related myths and taboos prevailing in India, the scientific explanation to burst the myth and a brief description and recommendation about various strategies to address the issues of menstrual myths prevalent in our society.

Key words: Myths, Menstruation, Taboos, Strategies.

Introduction: Menstruation is a natural and physiological phenomenon that is very normal to a girl's life. It is a part of the reproductive cycle in which blood from uterus comes out through the vagina. It happens in a healthy female body and makes motherhood possible for a woman.

Menarche i.e onset of first cycle of menstruation occurs between 11 – 14 years of age. The time span between the first day of a period and the first day of the next period is about 21 – 45 days. Bleeding usually persists for 2 – 7 days in a menstrual cycle. Menopause i.e the cessation of menstruation usually among women between 45 – 55 years of age.

Despite being a natural phenomenon unique to girls, menstruation has always been surrounded by secrecy of myths and taboos in many societies. Periods are accompanied by cramps, mood swings and heavy flow, whereas another addition to these are bizarre superstition and myths about periods. Such myths and taboos affect the girls' emotional, educational, mental, socio-cultural and their physical health during menstruation. Sometimes, these myths abstain them from participating in many aspects of socio-cultural life. These misconceptions are potentially harmful for the daily life of women and also for the society. The existing baseless superstitious

beliefs regarding menstruation literally act as barriers for advancement of proper and adequate knowledge on the topic “Menstruation”.

Objective : These current paper aims to discuss about-

- Menstruation related myths, taboos and superstitions prevalent In India.
- Their effect on the womens’ life .
- Various strategy taken by Government to combat them.

Superstitions and Myths about periods prevailing in India – Literature review

- In many parts of India women are considered to be ‘dirty and ‘impure’ during their menstruation. This thought begets the age-old belief ‘ a menstruating woman should not be touched’. This belief not only demeans a woman but is discriminatory also. But, actually women are clean during their periods as long as they maintain their hygiene. Menstruation are normal bodily mechanism does not equal to uncleanliness.
- In the Hindu faith women are prohibited from participating in daily household chores while menstruating. She must be ‘purified’ after the period is over to get allowed to return to her day to day chores her life.
- In a study regarding taboos and myths associated with women health in Punjab, it was found that myths and superstitions pertaining to menstruation are equally prevalent among rural and urban adolescent girls. Going to temple, entering in to kitchen, not attending to visitors etc. were reported to be found among adolescent girls. Apart from these, other superstitious beliefs and practices such as not wearing new cloths, not touching holy books, not looking in mirror were also found among the girls.
- Period blood is dirty- this age-old myth, originating from ‘Old Testament’ states that women are ‘uncleaned’, dirty while they menstruate. This superstitious belief further implies that having sex during menstruation is prohibited. But, contrary to this belief, the fact is that period blood is not dirty, it is a combination of blood, endometrial tissues, mucous lining from the uterus through cervix out of the body via the vagina.
- Having sex during periods may be unhealthy- another common misconception pertaining to menstruation is that having sex during periods may be detrimental to health. But this is not true, since sex during periods have numerous benefits including increased lubrication, reduced intensity of cramps and improved mood. But , it is true that couples may feel uncomfortable and messy while having sex during period due to the presence of menstrual blood.
- Exercise during periods may cause infertility or may damage the uterus- this misconception is very common. Exercise has multiple benefits since it reduces cramps, boosts mood and relieves fatigue-ness. But the exercise must not be too

vigorous or lengthy or strenuous, rather it should be light and type of movement to provide a feel- good factor.

- It's unsafe to swim during periods- this myth started before feminine hygiene where invented or became so popular. Fortunately, swimming or taking bath during periods do not enhances the risk of getting an infection. Additionally , period blood does not contaminate bath water since it does not bacteria like pee or poop. But to prevent a mess, tampon or menstrual cup may be used before getting in the water.
- There is no chance of getting pregnant if intercourse is done during periods – though this myth is partially right, but the fact is that pregnancy is always possible with unprotected sex, no matter the time of the month. More over , the fertility window (the days when pregnancy is possible) may overlap with a period. Research suggests that sperm can live in the uterus for up to ten days after intercourse. Hence, having unprotected sex at the end of period may lead to pregnancy, if they have shorter menstrual cycle. Even woman with regular cycle may be at risk, since fertility windows can vary from cycle to cycle. Sexual partners should assume that there is no safe day for unprotected sex unless the woman is using a hormonal contraceptive or IUD.
- In some communities of Chhattisgarh, menstrual blood is believed to be very powerful, hence this can be used by woman herself or others for Blackmagic and therefore woman should be careful to destroy the cloth used for menstruation after use. So women there, use to dry their menstrual cloths in discrete way and destroy them after using every month. On the contrary, mothers of Manipur preserve the cloth used by their daughters during their first period (menarche) and gift it back to her on her wedding since the cloth is believed to be powerful enough to protect the girl and her family from all difficulties, poor health and illness.
- Woman should not wash her hair during period – this myth is one of the shocking and bizarre period superstitions with unsatisfactory reasons. It is definitely hard for us to not wash our hair for five to seven days. This myth was originated from the fact that, back in those days there were communal bathing areas and this would make a woman to take bath discretely. Additionally, hot water was not available back in those days and cold water is believed to increase the intensity of menstrual cramps.

Recommendation :

- Social myths regarding menstruation and its hygiene is a social problem that has a major impact on the education and health condition of girls. These prevailing myths are making the girls to be deprived of basic fundamental rights.
- Community based awareness campaigns may be held in order to spread awareness regarding menstrual and hygiene among girls and women.

- Increasing the educational status of women may help to combat the cultural and social taboos related to menstruation and also would play an important role in improving the health status of community at larger scale.
- Low cost sanitary napkins may be locally made and distributed in slam and rural areas where these products are inaccessible. Government of India has approved a scheme under the National Rural Health Mission, to distribute low cost sanitary napkins for 1.5 cr adolescent girls in rural areas in order to improve menstrual hygiene.
- Sensitization of Anganwadi workers, health workers, social health activists regarding menstrual biology need to be done so that they can further disseminate the knowledge in the community and convey social support against busting the prevailing menstruation related myths.
- Workshops, educational programmes, seminars, conferences should be organized at national and international level to raise awareness about the menstrual hygienic practices. Teachers need to be trained so that they may become an integral source of knowledge for girls.
- Men and boys should be educated regarding the biology and hygienic practices of menstruation, so that they may understand that it is not a shameful matter to discuss.
- Research work should be encouraged in this area to evolve better management methods of menstrual hygiene and improve the accessibility and affordability of sanitary napkins.

Conclusion : Many period related myths are untrue and based on superstitions that perpetuate gender – based discrimination and behavioral restrictions for women. These myths restrict women to talk openly about menstruation and they become unable to know whether the menstruation cycle is a normal biological process or not.

To address the issues in more holistic ways, we need some multisectoral approaches in order to link physical structure, water and sanitation project with woman health and reproductive health education programs. Health activists and social workers need to be involved to mobilize social support to eradicate the prevailing myth, misconceptions and taboos regarding menstruation. Girls and women should understand the fact that menstruation is natural biological phenomenon for which they have the power of procreation.

Menstruation should be a part of syllabus of Science subjects in order to increase knowledge level among female students and this will consequently help to improve their attitude toward this physiologic process. Sources such as social media or media outlets may be used to disseminate awareness among mothers in the community. This may improve the quality of life, increase self-confidence and prevent any further physical problems.

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