



**Silenced by Stigma: Taboos and Practices Related to Menstruation in Nizdamaka,
Barpeta District, Assam**

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ABSTRACT

Menstruation is a natural physiological process, yet for centuries, it has been surrounded by taboos and rituals in many societies. Menstruating women are often considered untouchable due to prevailing cultural and religious taboos. In Assamese society, menstruation is often perceived as impure and unholy. These menstrual taboos are deeply embedded in religious, cultural, and social norms, shaping behaviors and beliefs across generations. A notable cultural menstruation reference is the Kamakhya Temple in Assam, a Shakti Peetha, where the worship of the goddess Kamakhya is uniquely celebrated during the annual Ambubachi Mela. The present study assessed the taboos and practices related to menstruation among women in Nizdamaka, Assam. The sample comprised 45 women aged between 18 and 40, selected through purposive sampling. The findings reveal that menstruation is widely viewed as unclean, leading to women's exclusion from religious, and social activities. Practices such as dietary restrictions and physical seclusion are rooted in patriarchal traditions. Drawing on local religious symbolism and contemporary gender discourse, this study contributes to the growing body of literature advocating for menstrual justice and gender equality in cultural contexts. Understanding these practices within their socio-cultural context is essential for dismantling stigma and advancing gender equality.



Introduction

In the heart of Nizdamaka, a woman's cycle is not time, it is taboo, wrapped in silence, bound by belief. Menstruation is a natural and essential biological process experienced by women, which is also intricately connected to various cultural beliefs. This physiological phenomenon signifies the transition of a girl into womanhood. The term 'menstruation' is derived from the Latin word 'mensis,' meaning "month," and the Greek term 'mene,' which pertains to the moon. Historically, the menstrual cycle has been associated with the lunar cycle, as both typically occur over an approximate duration of 28 days. The moon's cycle corresponds to its orbit around the Earth, which also spans about 28 days. Menstruation occurs nearly universally across diverse cultures, from the onset of menarche to the cessation of menstruation at menopause.

In many cultures around the world, menstruation has always been surrounded by taboos, practices, restrictions, and myths. It has always been associated with impurity and pollution. In many parts of India, cultural beliefs around purity and pollution deem all women as impure and unstable during menstruation, associating it with dirtiness. In the current state of Indian culture, the society is interwoven into a set of traditions, myths, and misconceptions, especially about menstruation, which is generally considered unclean in society. Women often face restrictions during menstruation, including prohibitions on bathing, changing clothes, and entering sacred spaces. They may also be limited in consuming certain foods, such as curd, milk, eggs, and various fruits. These limitations affect many aspects of their daily lives. Notably, menstruating women are often barred from the 'Puja' room and kitchen, as well as from offering prayers and handling holy books. These practices stem from cultural beliefs associating menstruation with impurity, leading to the perception that menstruating women are unclean and that the food they prepare is contaminated. It is widely accepted that during menstruation, the body emits a distinct scent or energy that can spoil preserved food. As a result, menstruating individuals should avoid touching sour foods, such as pickles.

Cultural norms and religious taboos often intertwine with traditional beliefs about evil spirits, creating feelings of shame and embarrassment regarding sexual reproduction. Women bury their clothes used during menstruation to prevent being used by evil spirits. Menstrual blood is often regarded as dangerous, and it is believed that a malevolent person can harm a menstruating woman or girl through black magic. Additionally, some believe that a woman can use her menstrual blood to exert influence over a man. However, there seems to be no logical or scientific explanation for this. Also, in some places, it is



believed that menstruating women should not touch the elderly because doing so will intervieweeseir lifespan.

One significant site of interest is the Kamakhya Temple located in Assam, India. This temple is dedicated to the goddess Kamakhya and is recognized as one of the oldest of the 51 Shakti Peethas, which are esteemed sacred sites associated with the goddess Shakti. The temple is particularly noted for ,its unique ritual known as Ambubachi Mela, which commemorates the annual menstruation of Goddess Kam. During this period, the temple remains closed for three days, reflecting the belief that the goddess experiences her menstrual cycle at this time.

In Assam, a woman during menstruation is required to isolate herself and sleep alone on the floor. This practice, known as "suwa hua" or "subo nuwara," enforces a strict rule: she cannot touch anyone, including family members, for the first three days. To regain her purity, she must wash everything she has touched and thoroughly clean her home afterward. This tradition underscores the deeply ingrained cultural beliefs surrounding menstruation in the region.

The prohibition of women from participating in religious rituals, entering sacred spaces, or engaging in certain activities is closely linked to the concepts of purity and pollution, reflecting historical patriarchal attitudes towards women's bodies as inherently dirty or polluting. Menstruation, with its ties to fertility and blood, has been stigmatized and shrouded in secrecy, contributing to the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes and discriminatory practices. The concept of purity on the other hand, often intersects with ideas of cleanliness, chastity, and moral integrity. In many cultures, women are expected to adhere to strict standards of purity, especially concerning their sexual behavior and reproductive functions, and sexuality can challenge these ideals of purity, leading to the marginalization and exclusion of menstruating individuals.

Research Methodology

Area of Study

The study was conducted in the village of Nizdamaka, located in the Barpeta district of Assam. The village has a total of 180 households and a female population of 200. Menstruation typically begins between the ages of 11 and 16, while menopause generally occurs around the age of 51. For this study, respondents aged 18 to 40 were selected, as 18 is considered the age of maturity and eligibility for marriage, while the upper limit of 40 marks the typical onset of menopause.



Types of Research

The current study is predominantly descriptive and exploratory. It aims to investigate the cultural taboos and practices surrounding menstruation and to outline their impact on the lives of women in Nizdamaka village. Additionally, the research incorporates explanatory elements to understand the socio-cultural reasons behind these practices, drawing on data collected through personal interviews.

Methods of data collection

Utilizing both qualitative and quantitative mixed methods to gain a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

Sampling

The study used purposive sampling to select individuals affected by cultural norms surrounding menstruation. Participants included young women currently experiencing menstruation and older women familiar with these practices. A total of 45 women aged 18 to 25 were chosen for the study.

Sources of data collection

Data was collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data was collected through an interview schedule, while secondary data was obtained from various sources, such as articles, reputable journals, newspapers, and internet sites.

Result

The study was conducted among 30 women aged 18 to 40 in Nizdamaka village, located in the Barpeta District of Assam. The aims of the study were to understand the various taboos and practices related to menstruation, identify the restrictions and limitations imposed by these beliefs, and clarify the differing perceptions that women hold regarding these taboos and practices. The findings reveal a significant prevalence of menstrual taboos and cultural restrictions rooted in historical, religious, and social belief systems.

Table 1: Age Distribution of Respondents

Age	Frequency	Percentage
18-25	9	30
25-30	6	20



30-35	5	17
35-40	10	33
Total	30	100

Figure 1 : This distribution reflects a diverse representation of women within the reproductive age range, ensuring that the study encompasses a broad spectrum of experiences.

Taboos and Practices related to menstruation

Out of 30 respondents, 28 interviewee considered menstruation as impure or taboo in that village. They view menstruation as a sign of impurity or uncleanness due to historical, religious, or cultural beliefs. These beliefs often lead to the segregation of menstruating individuals from communal spaces, such as kitchens, temples, or social gatherings and the remaining two respondents have refused to consider menstruation as taboo because they view that it as a natural and normal bodily process. Majority of the respondents view that menstruation often stem from religious, social, and cultural practices that have been passed down through generations. They view menstruation through lens of impurity and shame in their culture. Women and girls are commonly taught to hide their menstrual cycles, often experiencing feelings of embarrassment and discomfort due to the stigma attached to Menstruation. They confess that women are isolated from the rest of society during their periods. prohibited from participating in religious rituals, entering temples, entering into kitchen or engaging in certain social activities. Also, some women have stated that Some women are discouraged from touching or washing their genitals during their periods to eliminate the possibility that they might contaminate the water of a communal bathing area. Moreover, women are kept separate from the rest of the community to avoid contaminating sacred spaces or objects. They often prioritize education and understanding about menstruation, aiming to reduce stigma and promote menstrual hygiene.

Restrictions and limitations related to menstruation

Taboos and beliefs surrounding menstruation shape women's experiences significantly. They stated that Cultural norms often stigmatize menstruation, leading to restricted mobility limited access to resources, and diminished self-esteem for women. They face discrimination, isolation, and limited access to resources during their menstrual cycles. Breaking down these taboos and promoting menstrual equity is crucial for empowering women and ensuring their full participation in society. There are taboos or restrictions on women entering the kitchen or participating in certain activities during menstruation ,28 respondents stated that they are not allow to enter kitchen during menstruation. However, these practices



vary widely, and 2 respondents stated that they do not follow such restrictions. It's essential to respect individual beliefs and practices while also promoting understanding and empathy. They stated that some strict dietary restrictions are also followed during menstruation such as tamarind and pickles are usually avoided by menstruating girls. There are restrictions on certain types of meat, such as pork, or foods considered "heating" or "cooling" according to traditional medicine principles. All the 30 respondents stated that attending religious functions during menstruation is a complex and deeply rooted topic that intersects with cultural, religious, social, and gender dynamics. menstruating women are often prohibited from participating in religious rituals, entering temples, or touching sacred objects during their menstrual cycles. They are told not to touch religious objects or scriptures while menstruating. This practice is based on the belief that menstruation is ritually impure or polluting. Women are seen as physically and spiritually unclean during menstruation, and their presence in sacred spaces is believed to desecrate the purity of the space or the sanctity of the rituals.

Different perceptions of women regarding the taboos and practices related to menstruation

The study revealed diverse perceptions among women regarding menstrual taboos and practices, reflecting both traditional adherence and emerging resistance. They reported being taught these beliefs by older women in their families and communities, especially during their first menstrual experience.

A respondent, aged 29, expressed feelings of embarrassment associated with menstruation, stating, "I feel uncomfortable when I have my period. We are often advised to maintain distance from others, including avoiding sitting near elders, which makes me feel as though I have done something wrong."

Additionally, a woman aged 21 commented, "While I do not mind refraining from consuming pickles or curd during my period, I believe that participation in prayer or attendance at the temple should be a personal choice. Some of these traditional rules feel outdated and do not resonate with contemporary values."

Some of the respondents, expressed that Menstrual-related taboos and rituals should be eradicated from communities for several compelling reasons rooted in, gender equality, First and foremost, menstrual taboos perpetuate discrimination and inequality based on gender. By stigmatizing menstruation and associating it with impurity or shame, these taboos reinforce harmful stereotypes and norms that degrade the status and dignity of menstruating individuals, particularly women and girls. Such attitudes contribute to the marginalization of women in society.



Discussion

The findings of our study shows that majority of the respondents considered menstruation as taboo or impure. Because of the taboos, practices and stigmas associated with menstruation women are often excluded from areas such as kitchen, temples, and social gatherings. According to the study, the prevalence of menstrual taboos among women in the village is widespread, largely due to the enduring influence of traditional practices passed down through generations. They informed that certain stringent dietary guidelines are also observed by women who are menstruating, such as the avoidance of pickles and tamarind. Certain meats, like pork, are forbidden, as are meals that are deemed "cooling" or "heating" in accordance with conventional medical theories. They claim that during their menstrual cycles, women are frequently forbidden from taking part in religious rites, visiting temples, and touching holy things. They are advised not to come into contact with holy items or texts when they are menstruation. This custom stems from the idea that menstruation is ceremonially filthy or contaminating.

Respondents also revealed that their families had particular customs or practices around sleeping arrangements for menstruation girls. Some families even force them to sleep on the floor. Yet, some respondents claim that because they view menstruation as a normal, biological occurrence, they sleep in the same location as usual throughout their periods. Also, they have a belief that, no one should ever touch a woman who is menstruating, if someone touches a menstrual woman, they will become polluted.

They stated that there are many strong reasons, including gender equality, for societies to abolish menstruation-related taboos and customs. Menstrual taboos, first and foremost, support gender-based inequality and discrimination. Menstruation is stigmatized and associated with impurity or shame; these taboos perpetuate negative perceptions and social standards that diminish the worth and dignity of those who experience menstruation, especially women and girls. The study reveals that menstruating women are often prohibited from physical contact with family members and are required to eat separately, typically while seated on the floor. They are not permitted to sit on chairs or beds and are subjected to social isolation, distancing them from their routine daily activities.

Historically, menstruation has been surrounded by stigma, silence, and taboos in Indian society, leading to the marginalization and discrimination of menstruating individuals. However, in recent years, there has been a growing awareness and advocacy movement aimed at challenging these menstrual taboos, promoting menstrual hygiene, and fostering greater gender equality.



Conclusion

In conclusion, This study brings to light the everyday realities faced by women in Nizdamaka village when it comes to menstruation. Although menstruation is a natural and essential part of life, it is still surrounded by silence, shame, and restrictions in many communities. The women in this study shared how they are expected to isolate themselves during their periods, avoid certain foods, stay away from religious spaces, and even sleep on the floor. These practices are often rooted in the belief that menstruation is impure or polluting. Such restrictions not only affect women's physical freedom but also their emotional well-being and sense of self-worth. From a young age, girls are taught to hide their periods and follow these customs without question. These beliefs have been passed down over generations and are deeply embedded in the social fabric of the community. By understanding these experiences through different sociological lenses like conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, and feminism, we can see how these menstrual taboos are more than just traditions; they are also ways through which women's choices and bodies are controlled. To bring about real change, one must start open conversations about menstruation, both at home and in schools. Education and awareness can help break the cycle of shame and misunderstanding. When we listen to women's voices and experiences with empathy and respect, we take an important step toward a future where menstruation is treated as natural and dignified not as something to be hidden away.

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