



Women's Injustice Begins within Women: A Dalit Philosophical Inquiry into Puberty Rituals and Menstrual Restrictions in Rural India

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ABSTRACT

Women are considered as demigods of the society. Women bring changes in the socio, cultural, traditions and so on. Yet biological transformations among girl children and women affect restrict their involvement in family, society and work. Menstruation is a natural biological process experienced by women across societies. However, in many parts of India, menstruation continues to be surrounded by cultural restrictions and social stigma. This article examines puberty rituals and menstrual restrictions in rural India through a Dalit feminist philosophical perspective. While puberty ceremonies are often celebrated as important rites of passage marking the transition from childhood to womanhood, the practices surrounding menstruation frequently reinforce social hierarchies rooted in caste and patriarchy. The study explores how restrictions placed on menstruating girls such as spatial segregation, exclusion from religious spaces, and social isolation reflect broader systems of gender control embedded within cultural traditions. Drawing upon Dalit feminist thought, particularly the works of B. R. Ambedkar, Sharmila Rege, Gopal Guru, and Uma Chakravarti, the article argues that menstrual restrictions cannot be understood merely as cultural practices. Instead, they are connected to the ideology of purity and pollution that historically sustains caste hierarchy. The article also highlights how



women themselves often become the transmitters of these restrictions within families. Mothers, grandmothers, and elder female relatives frequently enforce menstrual rules on younger girls. This process demonstrates how patriarchal norms become internalized and reproduced across generations. The article further examines a contemporary case study from Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, where a Dalit girl was reportedly prevented from sitting inside her classroom during an examination because she was menstruating. By situating menstrual stigma within the framework of caste, gender, and social justice, this study calls for critical reflection on cultural traditions and emphasizes the importance of menstrual health awareness in educational institutions. Transforming social attitudes toward menstruation is essential for promoting dignity, equality, and justice for women and girls.

Introduction

Menstruation is a biological process that marks an important stage in the reproductive life of women. Across many cultures, the onset of menstruation commonly referred to as menarche is recognized as a significant milestone. In India, puberty rituals are widely practiced in many communities to celebrate a girl's transition from childhood to womanhood. These rituals often involve ceremonial gatherings, gifts, and symbolic acts that acknowledge the girl's entry into reproductive maturity.

While such ceremonies may appear celebratory, the practices associated with menstruation frequently involve restrictions that regulate the everyday lives of women and girls. In many rural communities, menstruating women are asked to avoid certain areas of the household, refrain from touching religious objects, or sleep separately from other family members. These restrictions are often justified through cultural beliefs about ritual purity and pollution.

From a sociological perspective, menstrual restrictions reflect broader social structures that regulate women's bodies and roles within society. These practices are deeply connected to patriarchal values that define women primarily through their reproductive functions. At the same time, menstrual restrictions are also linked to caste ideology, which historically categorizes bodies and social groups according to notions of purity and impurity.



Dalit feminist scholarship provides a powerful framework for examining these issues. Scholars such as Sharmila Rege (2006) and Gopal Guru (1995) emphasize that the experiences of Dalit women reveal how caste and gender oppression intersect in everyday life. Menstrual restrictions cannot be analysed solely as gender practices; they must also be understood within the context of caste hierarchy and social exclusion.

Dalit Feminist Theoretical Framework

Dalit feminist theory challenges dominant feminist frameworks that often overlook caste-based experiences. Sharmila Rege argues that the voices and testimonies of Dalit women are essential for understanding the multiple dimensions of social inequality in India. According to Rege, Dalit women's narratives reveal how caste, gender, and class operate simultaneously to shape their lived experiences.

Gopal Guru similarly argues that Dalit women "talk differently" because their experiences cannot be fully captured by mainstream feminist discourse. For Guru, the lived experiences of Dalit women highlight forms of marginalization that emerge from the intersection of caste hierarchy and patriarchal power.

The writings of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar provide a crucial theoretical foundation for analysing the relationship between caste and gender. In his influential essay *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development*, Ambedkar argued that caste survives primarily through the regulation of marriage and the control of women's sexuality. Ambedkar wrote:

"Caste is an enclosed class. Endogamy is the essence of caste." (Ambedkar, 1916, p. 9)

Ambedkar further argued that the preservation of caste depends upon strict social control over women. By regulating women's reproductive roles and social mobility, caste society ensures that caste boundaries remain intact.

Uma Chakravarti's concept of Brahmanical patriarchy provides further insight into this relationship. Chakravarti explains that caste hierarchy and patriarchy operate together to maintain social order. Within this system, women's bodies become sites through which social purity and caste identity are preserved. Menstrual taboos and restrictions are therefore not merely cultural practices but part of a broader ideological framework that defines women's bodies as impure during certain periods.



Women's Injustice Begins Within Women

A striking feature of menstrual restriction practices is that they are frequently enforced by female members of the family. Mothers, grandmothers, and elder women often instruct young girls about the rules they must follow during menstruation. Girls are told where they may sit, where they may sleep, and which household spaces they must avoid.

From a sociological perspective, this phenomenon reflects the internalization of patriarchal norms within family structures. Feminist scholars argue that systems of gender inequality persist not only through male authority but also through everyday practices reproduced within households (Chakravarti, 1993).

Thus, when mothers and female relatives require girls to stay outside the house, avoid household spaces, or refrain from touching religious objects during menstruation, they unknowingly participate in maintaining systems of gender control. In this sense, women's injustice sometimes begins within women themselves not because women intentionally oppress one another, but because social traditions and patriarchal values have been deeply internalized across generations.

These practices illustrate how cultural traditions can become normalized to the point where they are rarely questioned. Women who enforce menstrual restrictions often believe they are protecting cultural values or maintaining family traditions. However, these actions also reproduce systems of inequality that limit the dignity and autonomy of younger girls.

Case Study: Menstrual Discrimination in a School Context

A contemporary incident from Tamil Nadu illustrates how menstrual stigma can extend beyond domestic spaces into educational institutions. In April 2025, a Dalit girl studying in Class 8 was reportedly prevented from entering her classroom during an examination at Swamy Chidbhavanda Matriculation Higher Secondary School in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu. According to reports, the student belonged to the Arunthathiyar community, a Scheduled Caste group within the Dalit community.

The girl was asked to sit on a staircase outside the classroom while writing her examination because she was menstruating. The decision was reportedly taken by the women principal of the school. The incident came to public attention after a video circulated showing the student sitting on the staircase while writing her exam.



The case sparked widespread debate about menstrual stigma and caste discrimination in educational institutions. Critics argued that preventing a student from entering the classroom due to menstruation violates principles of equality, dignity, and educational rights.

Instead of isolating the student in the name of ritual purity or hygiene, the school authorities could have taken a more supportive approach. For example, the principal could have provided menstrual hygiene awareness, offered access to sanitary products, or ensured that the student received medical assistance if required. Such responses would have affirmed the dignity of the student while promoting health education.

Educational institutions play an important role in shaping social attitudes. When schools reinforce menstrual stigma, they risk perpetuating harmful myths rather than challenging them through scientific knowledge and awareness.

Discussion

Menstrual stigma is not only a cultural issue but also a matter of public health, gender equality, and educational access. Research on menstrual hygiene management indicates that many adolescent girls experience embarrassment and confusion during their first menstrual cycle due to the lack of adequate information and support.

Studies have shown that poor menstrual hygiene management can contribute to school absenteeism among adolescent girls. Lack of access to sanitary products, inadequate sanitation facilities, and social stigma often discourage girls from attending school during menstruation.

From a Dalit feminist perspective, menstrual stigma must also be understood within the framework of caste ideology. The belief that menstruating women are impure reflects the broader cultural logic of purity and pollution that underlies caste hierarchy. When such beliefs influence institutional practices, they reinforce both gender inequality and caste discrimination.

Addressing menstrual stigma therefore requires not only improvements in health education but also broader social transformation. Schools, families, and community institutions must work together to challenge myths surrounding menstruation and promote a culture of dignity and respect.

Conclusion



Puberty rituals in rural India represent a complex interaction between cultural tradition, gender norms, and social regulation. The onset of menarche is widely recognized as an important life transition and is often marked through ceremonial practices that symbolize the movement from childhood to womanhood. Traditionally, these rituals serve several meaningful purposes: they provide biological recognition by acknowledging that the girl has reached reproductive maturity, function as a social announcement informing the community that the girl has entered womanhood, and offer a form of cultural education in which older women guide the girl about menstruation, responsibilities, and expectations related to adulthood and future marriage.

However, alongside these cultural intentions, certain practices associated with menstruation raise serious ethical concerns. In many villages, girls are not only kept in temporary seclusion during their first menstruation but are also expected to observe restrictions during every monthly menstrual cycle.

In some villages, women are still asked to remain outside certain areas of the house for two or three days, while in other villages they may be allowed inside the house but are not permitted to enter the prayer room or touch religious objects and ritual items. These practices are often enforced by mothers, grandmothers, and other female relatives who view them as inherited cultural traditions.

Yet this phenomenon also reveals how gender inequality can be reproduced within the domestic sphere through internalized social norms. When women themselves become agents who transmit and enforce restrictions on younger girls, systems of gender control continue across generations.

Therefore, while puberty ceremonies may celebrate biological maturity and community recognition, the continued exclusion of women from ordinary household or religious spaces during menstruation raises fundamental questions about dignity, equality, and social justice. Cultural traditions should be open to critical reflection and transformation so that practices associated with menstruation do not undermine the dignity and autonomy of women but instead affirm their full participation and equality within family and society.

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