

Social taboo concerning on “Menstruation” culture: A study in Majhgaon of Assam

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Menstruation is basically a physiological change but it has been socially constructed in our Assamese society. Every society has its own set of social-cultural practices and belief system that specifically function in the society. There are various social-cultural belief taboos, cultural practices, are being associated with Menstruation. This particular study will try to examine the existing socio-cultural taboo that are being associated with menstrual culture and how this simple biological concept of “menstruation” has been reconstructed by our Assamese society.

Key words: Menstruation, culture, society, women.

Introduction:

In the law book of “Vyasa” it was clearly stated that when a woman is having her period, she should abandon all her works. She will have to remain isolated. She will have to remain as a destitute without exchange of any word with others and any movement of eyes, hands, legs, etc. She will have to lie on the ground without being excited, and having passed three nights in this way. She will be completely pure on the fourth day after the rise of sun and when she will bath and wash her used cloths. In “Arthashastra” of Kautilya it is explicitly mentioned that menstruation of women should be properly utilised. From the Indian traditional perspective menstruation is symbol of having good physical health and only after menstruation women can conceive therefore a menstruation should be treated in a fruitful way.

In Assamese culture, menstruation which is basically a reproductive element is considered religiously impure. There are many socio-cultural taboos, rituals, beliefs are practiced by women during their time of menstruation. On one hand this natural process of menstruation that is a part of woman life is symbol of blessing and on the other hand it is considered as impure. The word “menstruation” comes from old French “menstrual”, which comes from Latin “menstrualis”, meaning “monthly,” especially “of or having monthly courses.” (Kothari, 2010).¹

Majhgaon, a village in Sivasagar district under Bihubor Panchayat gave me the best setting for my study while doing the field work for my research. My genuine attempt, while conducting the field work was to know the reason behind the practice of “menstrual culture”, about to know different taboos, how these normal physiological health element has been reconstructed and reshaped by our own society.

¹Kothari Bela (2010); Perception about menstruation: A Study of Rural Jaipur, Rajasthan; Indian Anthropologists; vol-40, No-1, Indian Anthropological Association

Various religious and social taboos, socio cultural practices are been prevalent in our social structure since ages, and in some certain extend it define the existence of being women. The concept of pollution and purity are significantly attached with menstruation. The term “taboo” was introduced by Captain James cook (Das, 2008)². In Assam many significant rituals are attached with menstruation which simultaneously paves the way for other social and religious stereotypes.

In Assam, menstruation is basically deals as a period of sacred celebration. Menstruation as a impure state basically called “suwa” “Nuwara huwa” “subo Nuwara huwa” “akhubidhahuwa” in Assamese language which represents isolated status of women for a certain period of time. Women are not being allowed to do any household a, religious and social activities during these time.woman during the entire period of menstruation of seven to nine days performs many rules and regulation which basically refers “Niyom palon kora” among Assamese people. A women is not allowed to touch anything, to go out anywhere apart from own confined room, even they are not supposed to seat with other member of family specially with male member, they are not allowed cook and enter in kitchen at least for three to four days because its belief among assamese people that Goodesslakhi resides in kitchen. Women are strongly neither allowed to do any prayers nor can enter prayer house maturityin our Hindu society consist of strong belief as for example Goodess lakhi resides in kitchen and Prayer house is considered to be numerous God and Goodess abode, since while having menstruation a women is considered as polluted (suwa) she is allowed to keep herself away from these place which embody holiness and purity.³These traditional practices actually show some messages to society about her fertility, adulthood and womanhood.

Menstruation: As a social taboo:

The term taboo, which came into the English language from Captain Cooks travels in Polynesia, refers to anything (food, place, activity) which is prohibited and forbidden. For Durkhiem, observation of taboo has the social consequence of binding a social group together by means of common rituals and sentiments. Anthropologist Douglas (1966) argues that the concept of Pure and Ritual uncleanness(impure) exists in every society and pollution beliefs can be of relative categories. What is clean in relation to one thing may beunclean in relation to another and vice versa. Linked with numerous misconceptions, myths, superstitions, illpractices and even celebrations throughout different societies, menstruation,in practice is more social and cultural than a biological process.

In Assam the mention of this topic in the public place has been tabooed since ages. Women are only comfortable in discussing these issues among their female friends. Taboos related to menstruation such as women are considered weak, the status of pollution, and impurity are attached with menstrual culture

²Das, Mitoo. (2008). Menstruation as Pollution: Taboos in Simlitola Assam. Indian Anthropological Association

³Das, Mitoo. (2008). Menstruation as Pollution: Taboos in Simlitola Assam. Indian Anthropological Association

In Assam socio-cultural taboos are deeply rooted in society. The taboos and practices followed by every woman in Majhgaoon are the same but the perspective and perception of following them varies from household to household. The performance of taboos are equivalent to abide by the prescribed rules. A menstruating woman should always stay in her confined room, she is not allowed to touch any tangible or intangible items of household, by chance if they touch, it becomes impure too and she must clean or wash for further use. Married women are not supposed to wear vermilion till her third days of period, as it is a strong belief that vermilion has symbolic element in terms of purity. As menstruation is purely associated with impurity therefore married women neither wear nor should touch. Women are forbidden from touching any plants and roam around vegetables and fruits garden, because they are being told that if by chance they touch the fruits and vegetables might get rotten soon.

The main reason behind above mentioned culture regarding menstruation is the influence of some of the causes which determine the accumulation of the knowledge, practices and behaviour relevant to menstruation. These factors are mentioned below:

i) Educational Factor: In the case of Majhgaoon the light of education has not reached in the mind set of Assamese people yet. Lack of education always leads to lack of awareness regarding menstrual practices.

ii) Socio-Cultural Factor: We all human beings are part of society. There are some societal rules and regulations we are bound to follow. These socio-cultural restrictions are the main obstacles for advancement of knowledge and awareness regarding issues and existence of taboos.

iii) Religious Factor: India is a multi-religious country. Every major religion has its own perspective and perception regarding menstruation which gives birth to these socio-cultural taboos and practices.

Celebration of Ambubasi Festivals in Ma Kamakhya temple and concerning taboo in Assam:

Goddess Kamakhya and Ambubasi festivals are celebrated in the month of June every year in Kamakhya temple in Assam. Ma Kamakhya is renowned goddess of desire, she is being worshipped for the power of fertility. The origins of this temple said to be pre-Aryan in historical context. It is believed that Ma Kamakhya undergoes menstruation for three to four days. Common people usually do not take part in any activities related with farming, religious functions etc. During this particular period of time goddess Kamakhya who is actually being shaped as Yoni in stone covered with cloth. This cloth which is basically used to cover the yoni of goddess during this menstruation known as "angabastro". Later this particular cloth is distributed among the devotees along with the prasada. These particular days are accompanied by a fair called Ambubasi Mela. The Ambubasi festival serves as a practical illustration of how Hinduism harmoniously integrates different nuances associated with various aspects of menstruation: Ashaucha, austerity, rest, and celebration into one integral festival that is

beneficial to everyone.⁴. Every work, related to the earth and nature comes to a standstill for these days called “hat loga” in assamese terminology. For these days people restrain from any activity of harvesting, digging, planting or any activity which are directly or indirectly related to mother earth. A widow, who is staunch believer of Ma kamkhya, during my field interview she reveal that, she never cook anything for those days and survive on fruits and water, she strongly believed that they should not use firewood for making any food because woods are natural prouduct, any products came from nature directly or indirectly should avoid for these days.

Conclusion:The discussion on the concept of socio- cultural taboos concerning on menstruation with Assamese society some of the things that I personally observed such as in Assamese society people do worship women Goddess related with menstruation in very positive and sacred ways which must be celebrated, and worshipped, but on the other hand women are still abiding by the rules and restriction during their own time of menstruation in order to fit in structured social norms .Now the ironical question emerge in one way people consider menstruation in form of celebration but on the other side the whole culture of menstruation forces women to maintain isolation during their own time of menstruation. Now, being a citizen of civilised country its high time to have keen observation in our own culture and tradition to eradicate the loopholes so that future generation should aware of whether to practise these menstrual cultures or not with proper scientific validation. These taboos will keep on existing in our society weather in a form of means for pollution or rest regarding the menstruation culture but it should not affect women in terms of their existence and well-being.

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