

TABOOS RELATED TO MENSTRUATION AND MENSTRUAL PRACTICES AS RECOGNITION OF INJUSTICE

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Abstract: Menstruation and menstruating women are seen as impure and untouchable in our society but through whose eyes? These issues have never been raised by women as there are hardly any discussion around the concept of shame, purity, body in specific and menstruation and taboos attached to it in general. If women are not comfortable to put forward their ambiguities related to these issues and concepts, if they have no say over their lives during menstruation, then how come women are empowered?

During menstruation women are restricted from participating in various cultural, religious, social, political and economic interactions – such as, not entering temple, kitchen, not keeping fast and are required to follow various other rules. Women themselves do not acknowledge the menstrual practices as an act of inequality and injustice as it is considered to be normal for them, but normality is a myth in the present era as when everything seems normal, it is actually “abnormal” justice. If we observe closely, we would notice how women do face difficulties in following the various menstrual practices. This recognition of ‘abnormal’ justice would help to recognize menstrual practices as ‘abnormal’ injustice. The research question which I want to deal with in this paper is – How to see menstruating women and the menstrual practices as recognition of injustice? Whether it is recognized as an issue? Is there any recognition of the issue around body and impurity? Whether it is seen as injustice? And therefore, can we see it as recognition of injustice?

Keywords: Taboos related to Menstruation, Menstrual Practices, injustice, parity in participation, shame, impure.

Introduction:

The menses inspire horror in the adolescent girl because they throw her into an inferior and defective category.

This sense of being declassified will weigh heavily upon her. She would retain her pride in her bleeding body if she did not lose her pride in being Human.

—Simone de Beauvoir, *the second sex*

Menstruation is a natural process which is an indicator of the onset of puberty among girls but this entire process is surrounded by taboos and myths, which disbar women from various aspects social and cultural life. Traditionally the female body is culturally constructed and the beliefs, taboos and practices related to menstruation have a different meaning in different cultures. The traditional Indian cultural construction of menstruation differs from the scientific one. Women in India, during their period cycle are considered as impure because it is been associated to Indra’s killing of Vritras and which has been described in the vedas that the guilt of slaying a brahmana, appears every month as menstrual flow, which women had taken upon themselves as a part of Indra’s guilt. In different parts of India there has been presence of menstruating goddess. In parts of Punjab it was believed that ‘Mother Earth’ sleeps through for a week every month. After Navaratra, in some areas of Deccan, temples of goddess were closed, as she rested and refreshed herself from the tenth day to the full moon day. Even today in some parts of Orissa and Kamakhya temple of Assam, the rituals of the

menstruation of the goddess are performed during the onset of monsoon season. [1].

When it comes to a general behaviour towards menstruation, we can easily map a north and south dichotomy. On one hand in some parts of South India a women starting with her menstrual cycle is seen as auspicious and is considered as an event, to be publically celebrated and on the other in some parts of north India even the discussion about menstruation within family members (mostly males) is prohibited. Women are treated differently and considered impure just because they bleed every month. According to historian, N.N Bhattacharyya, historically the process of menstruation was considered to be very auspicious, representing potential fertility, which was symbolized by blood and the colour of blood. The sindoor (which is also red in colour) applied by married women in the peak of their hair symbolizes the sacredness of her fertile potent. Also in Indian culture red symbolises auspiciousness which is definitely associated with menstruation. [2]

If this entire process was once considered auspicious then how come it ended up being considered ‘impure’?

Beauvoir in ‘The Second Sex’ discusses the everyday difficulties most women have at some point in their lives in accommodating their cycling bodies to the demands of expected activity and modesty. She describes the onset of menstruation as a *crisis* for the girl for which she is not well prepared and about which she feels fear, shame, disgust, ambivalence but

also sometimes pride at becoming a woman. On the one hand, a girl takes pride in becoming women with the sexual and reproductive powers that it entails. On the other hand, she is expected to take care to hide evidence of her bleeding from family members (especially male members), schoolmates, and even strangers on the street. Girls typically regard menstruation with annoyance and discomfort and a sense that they themselves are distant from the process. These feelings of disgust and alienation often remain even as the woman matures.

In the Indian villages the entire process of menstruation is a taboo which is regarded as impure and on the other hand in the city, it is a taboo as it is regarded as a secret, something which should be kept hidden from the rest. When a woman in the village starts menstruating all her family members come to know about it as she stops entering kitchen and men of the house starts cooking, so it is not kept as a secret. On the contrary, in the cities, a woman has a tough time taking out her sanitary napkin from her bag or closet at public places or at home. In most parts of India the discernment regarding Hinduism is pivotal to the concept of purity and pollution. What comes out from the body is considered to be polluting and so therefore the bodies producing them are also considered to be polluted. There are various myths relating to menstruation which are unjust and restrict women in a lot of ways, such as, it is believed that a girl should not take bath during the first few days when she bleeding, as water is considered as a universal source of purification and the protection of water sources from menstrual pollution becomes a key concern.

It is very important that we recognise manoeuvres of injustice against women when it comes to menstruation and any kind of disrespect, exploitation and exclusion should be recognised as an act of injustice. To explain the importance of recognition of injustice I would like to bring in Nancy Fraser's work where she explains the shift from redistribution to recognition and why both are essential for social justice. We have progressed in many ways and to us women are much more empowered than they were ever before and on the whole it all looks normal. But as Fraser puts it, normality is a myth in the present era, as when everything seems normal, it is actually "abnormal" justice. When we observe closely, we would notice how women do face difficulties in following the various menstrual practices. This recognition of 'abnormal' justice would help to recognize menstrual practices as 'abnormal' injustice. [3].

The current debates of justice have a freewheeling character as they lack the structure of the normal discourse. The 'normal' discourse of justice generally deals with what incorporates as equal representation

and on the other hand in 'abnormal' justice, 'what', 'who' and 'how' of justice will be in dispute. Fraser discusses three dimensions to claims for social justice – redistribution, recognition and representation. The principle of equality is the basic ground on which redistribution is asked for, but question arises that what kind of redistribution to we look for when it comes to menstrual practices? According to Fraser, equality of social Justice rather than equality of opportunity, the ability to participate as equals is needed, therefore the three dimensions can be brought together under one common measure i.e. "parity of Participation"[4]. During menstruation, women are restricted from participating in various cultural, religious, social, political and economic interactions – such as, not entering temple, kitchen, not keeping fast or handling money etc. These practices violate the principle of participatory parity. Iris Marion Young in her work 'On Female Body Experience' tries to uncover and reflect on the social oppression of women as menstruators in two major forms: the shame associated with menstruation that pressure girls and women to conceal their menstrual events and the misfit between women and public places such as schools and workplaces, which often refuse to accommodate women's social and physical needs. Young also talks about five faces of oppression exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural domination and violence. If we see these faces of oppression from the point of menstrual practices and women's experiences in society, we would be able to observe how women silently, voluntarily and unconsciously suffer. Women are exploited, marginalized and isolated during the period of menstruation. They are not allowed to enter kitchen or any religious places, not allowed to take bath and are isolated from all the religious activities. They become powerless as they are considered 'impure' according to their customs and rituals. So, they do not voice out their concern against this violence. They do not even consider it as violence on them, therefore women themselves need to understand and recognize these unjust practices and should feel free to put forward their ambiguities related to these issues and concepts, they can be truly empowered when they have a say over their lives during menstruation and don't consider themselves as impure. [5]. [6].

Conclusion: The presence of such myths and taboos about menstruation in our society have negative impact on women's lives emotionally, mentally and most importantly on their health. There have been instances were economically weaker sections of the society don't allow their daughters to go to school, they lose their play times and their journey towards confining within the four walls of her home starts. There is an urgent need to create a real environment

where a woman can easily take out her sanitary pads without feeling ashamed or being occupied with the thoughts of being impure and where after seeing a woman bleeding, the man doesn't feel conscious of telling her by himself, where the women decide what to do or not to do when menstruating, where a girl doesn't stop playing once she starts bleeding, where the men acknowledge the pain and irritation that women undergoes while having her menstrual

cramps and most importantly a realization where one considers the menstrual practices and the shame suffered by menstruating women as a sign of injustice.

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