

Exploring Forms and Practices of Menstruation in the Changing Social System: A Study of Suryabinayak-05, Katunje, Bhaktapur

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Abstract

Menstruation forms and practices with restriction have a long history not only in a single culture and region but in various religions and cultures may vary according to the level of their cultural norms, values and superstitions. The aim of the study is to explore the forms of practices of menstruation in the changing Nepali society. The qualitative data were collected from the Suryabinayak-05, Katunje, Bhaktapur district. All total 10 potential research participants were selected for in-depth interview along with non-participant observation in the field. The study indicates that the women from Brahmin and Chhetri community affiliated to Hindu religion are practicing almost all forms of discrimination due to menstruation. Stay in a separate room, eating in a separate room, bathing in separate bathroom, be away from social activities and not participate in religious activities. This discrimination should be addressed through awareness programs in the community.

Keywords: Brahmin/Chhetri, discrimination, Hindu, menstruation, restrictions

Introduction

The Greek philosopher Empedocles (493-433 B.C.) suggests that the term "Mense" originates from the Latin word for a month, also linked to the moon. Consequently, the menstrual cycle is likened to the natural cosmic cycles observed in every woman's body. Menstruation is an entirely natural biological process occurring in every female's life, signifying a transition from

childhood to womanhood. This phase typically commences around the ages of 11-15, known as menarche, and concludes roughly between the ages of 45-55, termed menopause. It serves as a significant indicator of reproductive health and readiness for motherhood. Globally, approximately 52% of the female population (equivalent to 26% of the total population) falls within the reproductive age bracket (Madhavi & Paruvu, 2019). Nature inherently distinguishes between male and female based on their bodily structures, while society further segregates individuals based on social, economic, and political roles.

In Nepal, a country characterized by its multicultural makeup, there exist over 142 castes/ethnic groups, 123 native language groups, and 10 religions, each adhering to their respective norms and values (NSO, 2023). A notable aspect of menstruation is its cultural and social stigma, which has a longstanding history across various religions, cultures, and regions, with particularly strong manifestations observed in Hindu culture (Subedi & Parker, 2021). Misconceptions and myths surrounding menstruation are often intertwined with religious texts and teachings, leading to women being restricted from their regular activities for four to five, or even up to seven days, depending on cultural practices.

The belief that menstruation is both polluting and dangerous has been deeply ingrained since ancient times, and this perception remains prevalent in contemporary society. Despite advancements into the 21st century, many people still adhere to these traditional concepts, superstitions, and myths surrounding menstruation (Goffman, 1963). Consequently, there exists a pervasive societal and cultural stigma associated with menstruation, which is often regarded as a symbol of shame and inadequacy. This stigma has its roots in historical beliefs and has persisted over generations, shaping attitudes and behaviors towards menstruation in modern times. As a result, menstruating individuals may experience feelings of embarrassment, discomfort, and discrimination due to societal perceptions surrounding this natural bodily function.

The discourse in Nepal primarily revolves around the severe aspects of Chhaupadi Pratha, where women are confined to perilous and unsanitary conditions, enduring sweltering temperatures in summer and freezing conditions in winter. These conditions pose significant health risks, including chest infections, suffocation, pneumonia, diarrhea, and exposure to wild animals, sexual abuse, snake bites, and rape, both for unmarried and married women (Bauman et al., 2022). Chhaupadi Pratha is deeply entrenched in Nepalese cultural beliefs, myths, and misconceptions, perpetuated across generations. According to this tradition, when a woman menstruates, other household members must avoid touching her, fearing that she will bring them misfortune or harm. The practice of Chhaupadi Pratha in Nepal is associated with discrimination and the isolation of menstruating women, particularly prevalent in certain rural areas and among Hindu communities.

Menstruation has long been associated with a myriad of restrictions, taboos, and social myths, leading to discomfort, embarrassment, and unease. Our society has stigmatized this natural process, creating a common gap and difficulty in addressing menstruation, often resulting in reproductive tract infections due to poor menstrual hygiene (Chaturvedi et al., 2021). Despite

advancements, menstruation remains a significant issue in the 21st century, primarily due to deeply ingrained cultural beliefs, traditions, and practices. Even educated women may adhere to these practices because education alone is insufficient to change entrenched cultural norms. Additionally, personal beliefs and myths regarding menstruation, as well as societal norms and a lack of awareness about alternative approaches, contribute to the persistence of these practices among educated girls and women. However, promoting and encouraging positive changes can play a crucial role in shifting societal understanding and beliefs about menstruation.

Menstrual practices and restrictions vary across different castes and ethnicities. Castes like Magar, Tharu, Rai, Limbu, and Madhesi Brahmin tend to have more relaxed practices, enforcing strict restrictions only during worship. However, in Brahmin and Chhetri castes, strict adherence to menstruation restrictions and isolation is commonplace, though some communities within these castes have reported loosening of these practices compared to previous periods (Subedi and Parker, 2021). Additionally, the younger generation is actively challenging traditional beliefs and openly discussing menstruation in schools, homes, and communities, signaling a shift in societal norms. The family plays a dual role, providing support when needed but also contributing to inequality, control, and oppression in menstrual practices, particularly in joint families where women may face heightened restrictions. Women from Western Nepal tend to encounter more challenges with menstrual restrictions compared to those from the Eastern region.

Conversations about intersectional policies across different realms such as household, education, employment centers, and community settings aim to promote dignified menstruation. Another advocacy group known as the Global South Coalition for Dignified Menstruation (GSCDM) operates at both national and grassroots levels, aiming to empower women worldwide to uphold their menstrual dignity, safeguard their health, and combat stigma and restrictive practices associated with menstruation (Paudel & Gautam, 2020). Various governmental bodies, organizations, and UN agencies are also engaged in efforts to advance women's rights and well-being, starting from the local level. These non-governmental organizations also offer support to girls and women, advocating for their voices, rights, and responsibilities.

Primarily in Nepal, menstrual research has predominantly concentrated on key themes such as menstrual health management, practices, and the portrayal of menstruation as a stigma and taboo (Robinson et al., 2015). Researchers should place greater emphasis on exploring topics such as the extent to which menstrual practices and restrictions have evolved into matters of harmony and constitutional rights. Research studies should delineate the transitional stages in this regard.

Data and Methods

The study was conducted in Suryabinayak-05, Katunje, Bhaktapur district, which predominantly comprises individuals adhering to the Hindu religion. The area represents a mixed society, facilitating easy access to potential respondents and enabling non-participation

observation. Selecting this locality as the study area was deemed advantageous due to its familiarity to the researchers and the ease of conducting research within the community setting. The study included individuals from 10 different caste/ethnic and religious groups, ensuring diverse representation for in-depth interviews. Women aged between 15 and 45 years were included in the study sample, capturing a broad spectrum of experiences and perspectives within the target demographic.

The qualitative data collected during the study underwent transcription in accordance with specified guidelines. A summary sheet was subsequently created to provide an overview of the collected data. Utilizing this summary sheet, themes within the data were identified and coded. Through this process, narratives began to emerge from the field, reflecting the experiences and perspectives of the participants. These narratives were then analyzed and presented within the research paper.

Drawing from the narratives shared by the women participants, the findings of the study elucidate the various forms and practices associated with menstruation. Through detailed examination and interpretation of the narratives, the research sheds light on the diverse ways in which menstruation is experienced and managed within the community. The descriptions provided within the findings section offer insights into the cultural, social, and individual dimensions of menstruation as articulated by the women participants.

Findings

The study's findings reveal that Brahmin and Chhetri women adhere to diverse forms of menstrual practices, each experiencing various restrictions during menstruation. Young girls aged 15-20, primarily secondary and higher secondary school students, adopt menstrual restrictions due to familial influence; their mothers and sisters also observe similar practices. Similarly, women of other age groups adhere to menstrual cultural norms ingrained since childhood and passed down through generations. Even women in menopausal stages continue these practices and encourage their daughters and daughters-in-law to do the same. While a minority of women express a desire to discontinue menstrual practices, a larger proportion prefer to uphold them.

Even with education and advanced degrees, women continue to adhere to menstrual cultural practices, showing support for Hindu beliefs and traditions. Education alone does not immediately alter these deeply ingrained cultural behaviors, as they persist despite educational attainment. Educated individuals still succumb to superstitions and misconceptions surrounding menstruation due to cultural and social pressures, limited resources, and the transmission of traditions across generations. Lack of awareness, despite education, underscores the enduring influence of culture. Educated women feel compelled to follow these practices due to societal and familial pressures, fearing judgment and facing expectations from both their communities and families. The study highlights that education alone is insufficient; there is a need to challenge and change the entrenched cultural practices within Hindu society.

The majority of participants from the Brahmin and Chhetri castes adhere to orthodox Hindu beliefs, blindly following Hindu culture and traditions, which entails strict adherence to various forms of restrictions during menstruation. In contrast, six participants from the Newar caste also follow Hindu culture but do not face the same restrictions as those from the Brahmin and Chhetri castes. They do not have to adhere to the restrictions associated with Hindu religion and culture. Only two participants from the Tamang caste, who follow Buddhism, do not observe menstruation in the same manner as in Hindu culture. In Hindu culture, there is a belief that failing to adhere to menstrual restrictions may result in divine punishment, with consequences extending to family members as well. Consequently, menstruating individuals must eat separately, stay apart, refrain from entering the kitchen or temple, avoid participating in social gatherings and religious activities, among other restrictions typical of Hindu cultural practices strictly followed by the Brahmin and Chhetri castes. Despite some minor changes and relaxed practices among a few individuals, strict adherence to menstrual practices persists among the majority of the Brahmin and Chhetri castes in Nepali society.

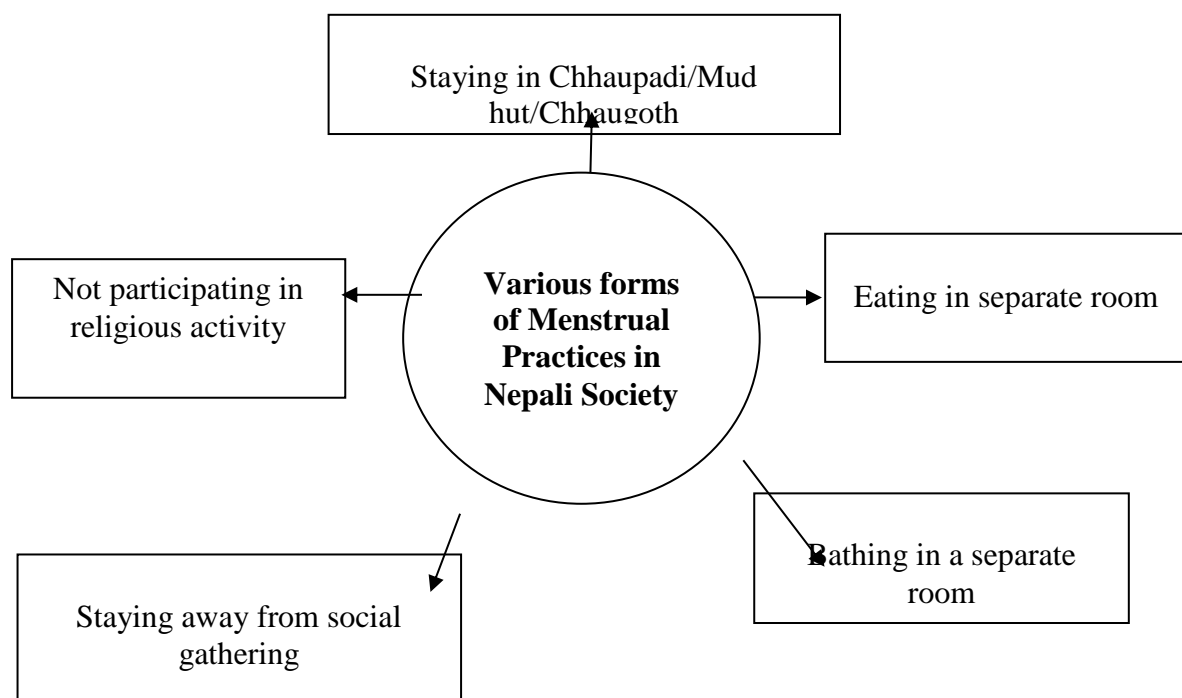
Despite Nepal being a secular country, Hinduism remains the predominant religion, with approximately 81% of the population identifying as Hindu. According to respondents from Hindu households, individuals are required to adhere to the rules and traditions of their culture, regardless of their level of education. This includes observing various menstrual restrictions, such as refraining from touching male members, religious items, or entering the kitchen, among others. However, they are not required to stay in Chhau huts during menstruation; otherwise, they are expected to follow all other practices. Conversely, participants from Christian and Buddhist backgrounds are not obligated to adhere to Hindu menstrual practices, but they are similarly restricted from entering places of worship or touching religious texts during menstruation. Despite the majority of participants being educated, they still comply with these practices due to cultural, societal, and familial pressures, as well as a fear of judgment and a lack of awareness about menstruation. Thus, the analysis indicates that Hinduism imposes the most stringent menstrual practices and restrictions on young girls and women, particularly within the Brahmin and Chhetri caste groups.

According to the responses from participants, some students encounter challenges attending school during menstruation due to a lack of necessary products and sanitation facilities on school premises. Employed women also experience discomfort during menstruation in the workplace, feeling tired and self-conscious, among other reasons. Housewives, too, face strict menstrual restrictions and lack access to menstrual education and products. Nearly all participants, regardless of their role, report some level of discomfort during menstruation. The majority of participants adhere to menstrual restrictions, particularly those from Hindu backgrounds who face familial, societal, and cultural pressures. While some individuals, either belonging to non-Hindu religions or having changed their mindset, do not follow such practices, many continue to do so due to deeply ingrained beliefs, despite having received a high level of education. This persistence of superstitions amidst educational advancement underscores the ongoing lack of awareness among the populace even in modern times.

Discussion on forms of menstruation practices

Nepal is a diverse nation characterized by a mixture of castes, religions, and cultures. While there is a variety of religious beliefs practiced throughout the country, Hinduism is the dominant religion, with a significant majority of the population identifying as Hindu. Within Hindu culture, there are significant practices and rituals surrounding menstruation, particularly for females. These practices often entail various levels of restrictions and taboos that menstruating women are expected to adhere to. Among the different religious groups in Nepal, including Buddhists, Christians, and others, there are also some level of restrictions related to menstruation. However, the level of restriction is typically higher within Hindu culture, particularly among the Brahmin and Chhetri castes, which are considered to be more orthodox in their adherence to Hindu traditions.

The study area, reflecting the broader demographics of Nepal, primarily consists of respondents who identify with Hindu culture. According to the participants in the study, there are several major practices that they adhere to during menstruation. These practices can be visualized in a diagram to illustrate the various rituals, taboos, and restrictions that menstruating women follow within Hindu culture in Nepal. This diagram serves to provide a clear and concise representation of the cultural practices surrounding menstruation observed by the participants in the study area.



Staying in Chhaupadi/Chhaugoth/mud house

Chhaupadi is a harmful and risky tradition prevalent in rural areas of Nepal, particularly in the western region. Despite its traditional nature, it persists in these parts of Nepal. In 2004, the

Supreme Court of Nepal banned the Chhaupadi practice, yet it continues to be heavily practiced, particularly in the mid and western regions of the country. This practice involves sending girls and women to secluded huts located far from their usual residences during menstruation. During this isolation period, women face various risks, including attacks by wild animals, the threat of rape, and the potential for contracting diseases.

The Nepali government has recognized Chhaupadi as an illegal practice, yet efforts to eradicate it from society are ongoing. Further action and processes are necessary to completely eliminate Chhaupadi practices and ensure the safety and well-being of women and girls in Nepali society. Despite legal measures and awareness campaigns, the deeply ingrained cultural beliefs and social norms surrounding Chhaupadi present significant challenges to its eradication. Continued efforts from government authorities, civil society organizations, and communities are essential to bring about lasting change and eliminate this harmful tradition from Nepali society.

Eating in separate room

This common practice in Nepali society, particularly among Hindu culture, pertains to the segregation of girls and women during menstruation. Typically, during menstruation, girls and women are separated from the rest of the household for up to three days until they are deemed "pure" after bathing on the fourth day of their menstruation cycle. Throughout this period, they are provided with separate water and cooked food, which is served to them by a family member without direct contact. Additionally, they are prohibited from entering the kitchen and are required to stay in a separate room within the house. According to the participants, they must adhere to these practices during their menstruation for the prescribed duration of up to three days, after which they may resume their household activities following bathing. During this isolation period, they are not permitted to share the same room for eating with other family members. These practices reflect deeply ingrained cultural beliefs and traditions surrounding menstruation in Nepali society, particularly within the Hindu community, where adherence to such customs is considered essential for maintaining purity and observance of religious rituals.

Bathing in separate room

In the past, menstruating women were required to bathe in a separate location and refrain from touching anyone until they were deemed "pure" on the fourth day of their menstruation cycle, following bathing and washing. However, in contemporary times, it has become common for menstruating women to use the same bathing area and laundry facilities as other members of the family. According to the responses from participants, there is no longer a need for menstruating women to utilize a separate bathing area or laundry space; they can use the common facilities shared by the household. This shift in practice reflects a broader societal change over time, where the traditional requirement for segregation has largely been abandoned in favor of more inclusive and practical approaches to menstruation hygiene. While this change is prevalent in most societies, it may still persist in certain areas, particularly in rural regions of Nepal, where traditional customs and beliefs may be more deeply entrenched. Overall, this

evolution in menstrual practices highlights the dynamic nature of cultural norms and the adaptation of traditions to contemporary lifestyles.

Staying away from social gathering

When a woman is menstruating, she often refrains from participating in social gatherings due to societal perceptions of impurity and discomfort. Even other women may view her differently during this time, associating menstruation with notions of dirtiness and impurity. Additionally, the woman herself may feel uncomfortable for various personal reasons, such as fear of leakage, embarrassment, or physical discomfort. According to respondents, menstruating women typically avoid attending social events, prioritizing rest over involvement. However, if the event is deemed important, they may make an effort to participate, albeit reluctantly. Otherwise, they prefer to refrain from attending and instead opt for rest during their menstruation period. This practice reflects the cultural and social norms surrounding menstruation, where women often feel compelled to withdraw from public activities during this time due to societal attitudes and personal discomfort.

Not participating in religious activity

Women, particularly those from Hindu culture, are prohibited from engaging in religious activities during menstruation, including rituals like puja, fasting, and entering temples. They are also excluded from participating in social religious events such as marriage ceremonies, Bratabandha, Pasni, Nuwaran, and others. There is a belief that violating these prohibitions will result in punishment or curses from the gods, affecting both the woman and her family members. Respondents express a reluctance to participate in religious activities during menstruation due to longstanding cultural practices, which they find difficult to change. Consequently, they abstain from applying tika during Dashain festival if menstruating and refrain from celebrating Tihar and other festivals during their menstrual period.

During menstruation, women are often prohibited from touching certain items such as pickles, holy books, statues or photos of gods and goddesses, plants, and seeds. There is a belief that if a menstruating woman touches these objects, negative consequences may occur, such as the food becoming spoiled or the woman being punished by the gods. These restrictions are enforced by societal norms, which dictate a variety of rules regarding what is permissible for menstruating women to touch or consume. In Nepal, which is known for its heterogeneous society, cultural practices and traditions are diverse and interwoven. Respondents in this context find themselves navigating these societal expectations within their own households, adhering to the prescribed restrictions during menstruation. These customs highlight the intricate relationship between culture, tradition, and menstruation within Nepali society, where beliefs and practices are deeply ingrained and upheld across different communities and households.

It is argued that various cultural norms, social taboos, and values, women face numerous restrictions during menstruation. These restrictions include staying away from home for up to seven days, being prohibited from entering the kitchen or temples, and abstaining from performing any rituals or functions. They are also not allowed to consume certain foods like

oranges, mangoes, and pickles. Additionally, menstruating women are unable to partake in festivals they have eagerly awaited for a year if their menstruation falls on that day. This imposition of restrictions raises questions about the fairness and respect for women's choices and interests. Furthermore, there is a fear of spoiling seeds or being attacked by insects if women touch plants or fields during menstruation. Used menstrual clothes are typically dried in secret shade, although they should ideally be dried in sunlight. Many adolescent girls suffer from infections and heavy bleeding during menstruation, which is often perceived as shameful and kept secret. Cultural norms dictate that menstruation is a taboo subject, with females only discussing it with close family members and friends. Openly discussing menstruation is discouraged, and individuals are taught from a young age to keep it a secret and not to share it with others, perpetuating a culture of silence surrounding menstruation.

Due to societal norms and cultural taboos surrounding menstruation, schoolgirls, housewives, and working women experience various challenges and discomforts during their menstrual cycles. These norms and values, particularly prevalent in Hindu culture and among the Brahmin and Chhetri communities, impose numerous restrictions on women during menstruation in Nepali society. Despite being educated and knowledgeable about menstruation, women are still subjected to these practices due to societal and cultural pressures. They are compelled to abide by restrictions such as seclusion in separate rooms, eating alone, bathing separately, avoiding social gatherings, refraining from participating in religious ceremonies, and avoiding contact with religious items and certain foods. Consequently, girls and women continue to endure these restrictions and practices on a monthly basis, highlighting the ongoing challenges they face regarding menstruation.

Conclusions

The study indicates that menstrual stigma persists in Nepali society, largely influenced by Hindu cultural norms that impose restrictions and exclusions during menstruation. As Nepal is predominantly Hindu, many women experience these practices, with Hindu women facing more restrictions compared to non-Hindu women. Despite progress, remnants of Chhaupadi tradition persist in certain regions, subjecting women to severe hardships. Rural women, in particular, face challenges in accessing menstrual hygiene resources, education, and awareness. Religious and cultural beliefs perpetuate societal control and discrimination, relegating women to impurity and inferior status during menstruation.

Promoting dignified menstruation is essential as dignity should always take precedence. Menstrual blood ought not to be stigmatized as sinful or impure; rather, it should be regarded as a natural and healthy aspect of women's bodies. It's crucial to provide women with diverse choices, and menstruation should not be solely relegated to women's concerns; it should be viewed as a family matter. Creating an environment where women feel comfortable discussing menstruation openly with anyone, be it a brother, father, husband, sister, or mother, is imperative. Men also have a responsibility to support women during menstruation. Increased

awareness, education, resources, women's empowerment, and improved hygiene practices have led to some positive changes in menstrual attitudes and practices. However, further changes and improvements in beliefs, practices, and culture are necessary. A significant transformation is required to create a stigma-free society that empowers women and upholds their dignity.

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