

## Blood and Social System: Battle of Purity and Impurity

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September 2025

### Abstract

*This ethnographic research examines the female subjectivity regarding their menstrual understanding, perceptions, restrictions and practices within the prevailing Hindu and Buddhist notions of purity and pollution. Local Dhimi, priest, politician and social workers reported that they are uncertain about the impurity but cannot say “it is pure”, as the cultural, religious and social systems have created confusion. When a lady is menstruating, she is not allowed to contact anyone. If someone does, they must be cleansed by bathing and drinking cow urine. Because it is thought that the pants may die or grow deformed, she is not permitted to touch pregnant ladies or green hair (Water Aid in Nepal, 2009). In contrast, Buddhist sects differ from Hindu religions. Buddhism has a pure view of menstruation. I have captured mixed views on these practices, debating whether they are “pure or impure.” Numerous voices advocate for change; however, it remains unclear how the battle between purity and impurity will be resolved. I have used four different data collection methods, with focus group discussions and personal interviews, across four provinces and seven districts.*

**Keywords** *Menstruation, knowledge, perception, practices, restriction*

### Introduction

In Nepalese vernacular, the words *Mahinawari*, *Nachune* and *Para Sareko* are commonly used to address menstruation, meaning “untouched” by menstruating women. Various perceptions have always restricted menstruation. Differences in attitude persist among countries, cultures, religions and ethnic groups, despite some degree of openness (Water

Aid in Nepal, 2009). Menstruation is still associated with several religious and cultural taboos in various regions of the world, including emotions of shame and impurity, as well as the prohibition against discussing it. I understand menstruation as an everyday, normal, natural phenomenon for females; however, it is still associated with some mark of suffering and embarrassment. No doubt, menstruation is a biological process, but in some Nepalese societies, it has been defined as impure. There is a significant debate about purity and impurity. Although menstruation is a natural and organic phenomenon, it is considered an impurity in most of the Nepalese community. The phenomenon is deeply embedded in false myths, beliefs and socio-cultural restrictions, often leading to neglect of the menstruation-related practices and disorders, especially in developing countries. Taboos create hesitation, shyness and fear in sharing problems, which are issues that young girls commonly face (UN Women, 2013).

The stigmatized image of menstruation as an offence in different societies and the stigma surrounding it. It has created an invisible shield that inhibits research into the different social and cultural facets (Seymour, 2008). This perception also slows down the advancement of social science research towards identifying and understanding menstruation from a social and cultural perspective. Insufficient research on this issue in Nepal, coupled with poor dissemination, has resulted in inaccurate information and a weak understanding of menstruation. The lack of information and misinformation about menstruation fosters irrational restrictions and taboos for menstruating women. Socio-cultural guidance and religious influences make menstruation an impure time frame.

According to Standing and Parker, “Menstruation is a natural and regular occurrence experienced by nearly all women of reproductive age” (2017 p. 156). Over the course of their 38 years of life, women normally experience around 450 menstrual cycles. Women are stigmatized as a result of it, though, as it is universally regarded as a cultural taboo (Standing & Parker, 2017; Crawford, Menger & Kaufman, 2014). The idea of menstrual contamination is generally accepted in Nepal, especially among Hindu populations (Bennet, 2002; Cameron, 1998; Crawford, Kaufman, 2014). However, opinions of menstrual pollution fluctuate depending on the religion, social status and

customs. Regardless of caste, women are perceived as polluting during their periods and deliveries (Standing & Parker, 2017). In the Buddhist community, menstruation is seen as a natural and healthy physiological process, whereas Hinduism prescribes opposite practices.

### **Ethnographic method**

This research led the *Dignity without Danger 'East' Team of the project*. I had the opportunity to participate in this research on 'Menstruation', organized by Tribhuvan University in collaboration with SOAS, University of London and Liverpool John Moores University, UK. The East team visited the four provinces and eight districts of Nepal from February 2018 to July 2022. Researchers from diverse backgrounds made the fieldwork an engaging and insightful experience. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1997), the process of data analysis is very complicated. Things are simple and open in the beginning and more specific and directed at the bottom". Similarly, in Patton (2000), the qualitative analysis involves making sense of massive amounts of data, reducing the volume of raw materials, identifying substantial patterns and constructing a framework for data interpretation.

During the data analysis process, I initially recorded interviews through a detailed and iterative approach, word by word and line by line, to construct meaningful sentences that addressed the research questions. Raw data were then categorized based on the responses and interpretations of participants. The presentation and analysis of the findings are organized in a thematic order that emerged from the research question and its objectives. Data were collected, presented and analysed from interviews and related documents on menstruation according to these themes.

This qualitative study typically includes case studies and generally descriptive studies. Qualitative research seeks to comprehend a specific social setting, including events and the function of interaction. The researcher catalogues, contrasts, compares, duplicates and classifies the object of study to comprehend a social phenomenon gradually. This process is essentially an investigative one (Creswell, 2003, p. 198). Interviews and observation

are common components of qualitative research methodologies, although case studies, conversations and historical or document analyses are also possible. Thus, to make the research study thorough, qualitative data were gathered. Meetings and discussions with participants produced this type of data, which documented their experiences.

The researchers employed primary data collection techniques to gather information. These included key informant interviews, in-depth face-to-face interviews and focus group discussion. In addition to eight focus groups, this study involved 150 interviews with male participants from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. Participants included educators, farmers, homemakers, entrepreneurs and students, ranging in age from 18 to 60. Research field diaries and observational notes also helped capture the context and details of the fieldwork. Photographs were taken to contextualize the findings and record both emotional and physical aspects of the location. Debates over the practices of Buddhist and Hindu religions in regulating menstrual practices, especially regarding purity and impurity, remain central to the cultural conflicts described in this research.

### **Pure Galaxies and Impure Bodies**

Feminists and Foucault (1997) contend that the body is a site of power that is overdetermined, a surface that is marked with historically and culturally specific practices and that is vulnerable to the influence of economic and political forces. To study body politics, feminism first inverted the conventional metaphor of the “body politics.” Bordo (1993) asserts that the human body is a politically inscribed entity, with histories and practices of control and confinement influencing its physiology and morphology.

Women have historically been compared to men, who are seen as the fundamental human subject and are seen as the active, moral and powerful half of a human being (Baily, 1993). Women are viewed as physiologically inferior and as victims of a disordered physiology when their biology deviates from the masculine ideal (Balsamo, 1996). Aristotle disparaged women as having inherent defects, claiming that they are the other half of essential evils for reproduction (1993). Males, on the other hand, favorably

compare themselves to women. The idea that men and women are opposites is further supported by polarized categories such as mind, body, culture, nature, spirit and matter that gender ideologies have corrupted. According to mind-body dualism, the body and the mind are separate entities. The body is seen as the primitive vessel of intellect. Man is a good person who represents culture as the rational, unified topic of thought; his intellect and reason are apart from and superior to his feelings and senses. A woman is a body that represents the irrational feelings, instincts and physical requirements of nature.

The biological essentialist and determinist perspectives, which characterize women based on their reproductive physiology, further solidify women's link with body and nature. As a result, she is weak and passive, literally a container for the male's needs and a breeding ground for their children, a creature motivated by instinct and emotion and a slave to her reproductive organs. While women are firmly rooted in their bodies, men can transcend their biological materiality, "a thing sunk deeply in its immanence" (De Beauvoir, 1988, p. 189). In addition to being inferior, women are mysterious, unknown and unsettling; they stand for that which has to be examined and analyzed until their secrets are revealed. As a result, the human sciences have scrutinized the female body significantly more than they have the male body. Pathology has actively and completely investigated every indication of the anomaly. Since the female body is primarily used for reproduction, it is imperative that female libido be restrained and that women's alleged character weaknesses be shown.

It is indisputable that the definition of pure and impure in any given cultural setting primarily applies to entire populations. As it permeates smaller communities from bigger ones, the line between purity and pollution gets increasingly blurred. Alternatively, communities, even families and ultimately the person, who thereafter displays unique combinations of impure and pure composite Sharma (2014). In Hinduism, there are two main forms of purity: mental purity and bodily purity, which involve more than only hygiene but also ceremonial conduct and its importance. In this sociocultural setting, the temple's kitchens, worship areas and gardens functioned as a place of purity where women who are menstruating are not permitted to enter. During the interview, I asked the participants, "Do you visit the temple during menstruation?" A 27-year-old participant

explained:

According to my grandmother, menstruation makes us unclean. I did not comprehend what she meant when I was younger. When I had my first period, I realized why we are not allowed to attend temple services or participate in joyous rituals because we are viewed as filthy. The temple is in a spotless location. We go there to pray to the gods, who assist us in purging ourselves of impure ideas, deeds and conduct. I have to abide by the regulations if I am Hindu. I do all of these things to keep God in mind, but not during my periods. This is not right for me, not for God. Her understanding is that menstrual blood is impure and with an impure body, one should not enter the pure places. Impure blood harms all.

An additional 36-year-old lady had a complex method of understanding this embodied impurity, including. “Our bodies release much dirt. We should refrain from doing anything related to God during that period; you cannot go to the Temple, Gumba and scared places”.

The use of the words “impurity” and “harmful” indicates that girls have internalized negative ideas about menstruation. Other girls described menstrual blood as “dirty”, thus justifying their isolation. Menstruation is a regular biological event throughout much of a woman’s life, yet it is almost universally stigmatized. Menstruating women were historically restricted from interacting with items, people and other living things because they were thought to be momentarily harmful (Delaney, Lubton, & Toth, 1988).

Due to the perception that menstruating women were momentarily harmful, many limits were placed on their interactions with people, objects and other living things (Delaney, Lupton, & Toth, 1988). Even in modern times, menstruation is still seen as dangerous and unclean. An elderly participant related her experiences, saying things like:

I do it for myself; I know that God is there.” However, the menstrual cycle is more significant to me than God. If I go by all the rules, which include avoiding going to temples or engaging in other religious activities, I may be a true follower and yet be clean.

The prevalent impression of the menstrual body is embodied in impurity during an interview with women who adhere to the limitations in one way or another. One participant, age 48, argued;

Our body is in an impure state; dirty blood emerges from it. According to the myth, we are actually purging ourselves of the sin of a god's death, so we should consider the time to do so. Furthermore, if we think this is a cleansing action, we have to acknowledge that the thing being cleansed is garbage. I will not risk taking that filthy body to a temple; I can avoid the kitchen and temple for four days.

A social worker also shared her bitter experiences in this way.

She is considered untouchable by her family members during her monthly cycle since she is considered dirty or unclean during her periods. She once went to a neighboring streambank hamlet to wash herself and her clothing and her family members accused her of contaminating the water. Although the issue was addressed after a few weeks, she did not have optimism that her circumstances would improve after marriage, since her family did not take into account or assist her at that time until she had assured her other villagers that she would not repeat her activities in the future.

Mensuration blood has rarely been recognized as a natural/physical function in Nepalese contexts. Several spaces, such as kitchens and temples and objects such as trees and plants, are considered pure, while menstruation is deemed impure. Boundaries are created around the menstruating body, restricting entry into sacred spaces. Cultural and religious orders enforce these rules, compelling women to follow restrictions and traditions. Feminism has benefited from Foucault's theory because it challenges Western ideas that have long been taken for granted. It challenges traditional perspectives that view the subject as a rational, unified being with a fixed core or essence, contending that nothing about a man, not even his body, is stable enough to be used as a foundation for self-recognition or for comprehending other men (Foucault, 1997).

**Religious variations**

Different cultures hold varying understandings of menstruation. In Western industrial societies, the basis of many norms surrounding menstruation is the belief that it should be kept private. By contrast, in some countries and societies, menstruation is openly viewed as impurity and uncleanness.

Menstruating women are customarily urged to adhere to certain guidelines in Hinduism. Women are encouraged not to contact older women or men, go into the kitchen, wear flowers, have intercourse, or attend temples when they are menstruating. There are no limitations, shame, or taboos related to menstruation in Buddhism. Women are allowed to enter any location and engage in religious pursuits, including meditation and devotion. A 40-year-old Buddhist lama said;

It is pure time; mensuration is not considered an impurity. Women have no restrictions on coming and going; they can do whatever they want. However, they do not want to enter the Gumba because they believe themselves to be impure, a result of cultural influences. Most women have restrictions and our community women also do the same.

Religion has a big impact on whether people support or oppose reforms in most families and communities (Kothari, 2010). Understanding societal attitudes, especially those of the elderly and senior citizens, is crucial in close-knit or family-oriented communities. In general, every community has its own cultural norms and prescriptions on the knowledge, attitudes, tastes and behavior of its people. In Nepali culture, women continue to be a repressed group, with a lesser status than men. A woman in her 60s clarified as;

There are two Margis (ideas): Shiva Margi in Hinduism and Buddha Margi in Buddhism. Shiva Margi follows the restriction of treating menstruation as impurity, whereas Buddha Margi does not have such restrictions. Buddhism views it as a purity, allowing women and girls to engage in any auspicious activities. There are vast differences between Shiva Margi and Buddha Margi.



They opposed menstruation. Shiva Margi denotes Hinduism and Buddha Margi symbolizes Buddhism.

Tuana (1993), women are portrayed as polluting, unlikable and unstable individuals with unstable psychological and emotional well-being due to menstruation myths and taboos. According to these viewpoints, women require therapy, which might have significant societal repercussions (Taunna, 1993). These restrictive practices remain common even among educated women. However, menstrual practices change from one generation to the next. The old generations view it as a God-given process, whereas the new generations perceive it as a natural bodily process, aligning with Ussher's (1992) statement. According to Beauvoir (1953, p. 281), the phrase "*one is born rather than one becomes a woman*" highlights the biological characteristics of women, including menstruation and reproductive organs. Thus, socialization, surroundings and exposure to cultural norms and values are how an individual learns to be a woman. The necessity of concealing menstruation sends a warning to girls that they should keep their bodily functions a secret from other people, which causes them to experience unnecessary psychological stress regularly. A young woman said;

My menstruation was quite shocking. I was immediately hidden after it was first spotted. As my brothers attended the same school, I stopped going to school for seven days. After that, I returned, but I was scared to see my brother.

In contrast, in the same society, a Buddhist nun said;

We do not have time to sit in the room. We must attend the Puja. Till now, there is nothing like that. Ani (nuns) must do all the work here, which may be why we cannot rest, even with such problems. We do not have such rules. Women need rest and support during menstruation, but we don't; we must work hard, which makes us physically and mentally uncomfortable. Mensuration is another reason why women are seen as morally inferior. Because of their incapacity, women are viewed as morally inferior to males while being physically weak (Taunna, 1993).

In Buddhism, menstruation is viewed as a natural physical excretion that women must go through every month. A monk of a Gumba explained,

All beings are the same. Periods are a natural process and we should not make them a big issue by discriminating against women. It is inherent in women. For example, if a flower blooms, we cannot cut it simply because it has bloomed. When time comes and it blooms. Similarly, you and I are feeling the cold winter in December and it is a natural law. During the summer, mosquitoes come. Therefore, we cannot ask why summer has arrived. There is no place for questions. If you have problems with your body, like headaches, stomach pain and so on, it just happens and you should think about treatment. If you have a headache and are in pain, it is unfair to tell you not to touch others.

He further said in the Tamang community, which follows a Buddhist culture, menstruating women are not discriminated against:

They used to say before that we should not visit temples during our period, but at home, we do not discriminate. Even though we are on our period, we can still offer incense to God, so we do not face that much discrimination. When I got married, they used to practice restrictions during those days. In the Tamang or Mongolian caste, we do not follow such restrictions. They are practiced in the Chhetri and Brahman communities. People there are even happy to follow them, as they do not have to cook. However, without menstruation, we cannot have children. If we can offer flowers to God, then menstruation should also be accepted as a natural process. In the past, people followed these practices because they lacked access to water or clean clothing. People would be dirty so they might have followed such cultural rules. Now, those conditions no longer exist. We take showers every day and nowadays there are pads, so there is no need for panties. We should bathe daily, but sometimes we lack consistency in this practice. Still, some people prefer not to worship God, using the excuse that they can rest since they do not have to participate in rituals.

## Conclusion

There is a notable discrepancy in the understanding of mensuration, with varying religious and cultural perspectives. Mensuration practices are not stable but are changing with a more relaxed attitude. Ideas defend that menstruation issues cannot be discussed among members of society, while others say it must be celebrated. They also stated that female takes menstruation as a matter of shame and underestimate it. There are some issues that society does not allow people to discuss openly, as they are considered taboo. All healthy women experience menstruation, yet it is a topic cloaked in secrecy, taboo and negativity. If a young girl is not informed before its onset, she feels that something is very wrong with her, which generates negativity and fears towards her gender and lowers her self-esteem. Menstruation is often considered misery and pain; therefore, its origins and implications deserve increased attention. Menstruation practices, which have been subject to significant restrictions in both the past and present contexts, do not exhibit a consistent pattern across time and generations. Instead, changing family dynamics and both internal and external migration are contributing to the flexibility of these practices. Mensuration is a biological process that affects women; however, religion and belief systems guide the menstrual practices. Somewhere it has been very restrictively followed and somewhere liberal and flexible. One believes that it is the purity and another says it is surely impurity. Hinduism expresses that women are seen as unclean because of their menstruation. Taking an opposite standpoint in Buddhism, one could see it as a natural powerhouse.

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