



Menstrual practices and hygiene: A study on Nepali adolescent girls of Assam, India

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Abstract

The Nepalis living in Assam (India) are mostly descendants of those who migrated or were transferred from Nepal to work in various sectors by the British. Now, Nepalis are basically working in agricultural fields and rearing animals. They have assimilated with the greater Assamese society and also have maintained their identity. The paper is about the study of women's life and rituals related to women's life in the Nepali pastoral society of Assam. In Assam, whether Hindu, Muslim, or Christian, they observe rituals related to menstruation, which are physical, social, or psychological. In my observation, the ritual related to menstruation in Nepali society has significance according to their religion, caste, and ethnicity. From the field, it reveals that these practices are related to the concept of purity and pollution. The paper shows that Nepali women, and especially adolescent girls, are reluctant to talk about menstruation and hygiene practices. The study is based on qualitative research, FGDs, and in-depth interviews to collect information. The study is conducted in the rural area to find out the basic challenges encountered by the Nepali adolescent girls during their menstrual days. The paper shows how poor menstrual hygiene can lead to school absenteeism.

Keywords

Menstruation, hygiene, nepali society, purity and pollution

Introduction

The colonial period has witnessed the greatest human movement and settlement of people, resulting in the transfer and distribution of diverse population groups in different parts of the world. The commercialization and industrialization of the economy under the aegis of the colonial state also served to stimulate the natural migratory movement of the people. After the British occupation of Assam, under the patronage of the colonial government large number of Nepalese migrated to this region in search of life as *Gopalak* and Soldiers. The British came to Assam with a lot of hope and aspiration, but they could not reach their goal, as Assam was not a populous state. The devastation and wholesale depopulation during the period of civil wars and Burmese invasions left 'vast tracts of wasteland throughout the province'. Every encouragement should be given to the immigrants to come and settle in the province. In a country with an industry, Assam had no other option but to increase land revenue. Lands were leased out to the people in favorable terms. The British government had not missed any opportunity to maximize its revenue collection. Accordingly, grazing, which was free from time immemorial in Assam, was taxed. To attract people and increase the revenue of the region, the Company introduced the Wasteland Rules on 6th March, 1838. According to the Rules, one-fourth of a land grant was to remain revenue-free in perpetuity. The remaining portion of the grant, too, was to remain revenue-free for the initial five to twenty years, the period according to the nature of the waste land concerned (Guha, 2006). 'Large-scale' Nepali migration into Assam began only with the colonial intervention.

The British official view toward the native people was that they were 'lazy', 'opium addicted', and 'indolent', and encouraged the surplus Nepali population to immigrate to Assam. The active policies pursued by the colonial government opened the valley to the Nepalis. The colonial government required a pliant labor force for all and sundry work from clearing forests to lumbering to domestic help, which was effectively provided by the 'versatile Nepali'. Apart from the recruitment of Nepali martial classes in police and military, what seems to have attracted the Nepal is most to Assam were the vast expanse of greenery, dense forests, and hills, an abundance of wastelands which were full of lush green vegetation. This was, indeed, an ideal scenario for cattle-breeding (Chetry, 2016). **David Alatule** in *Assessing the Knowledge, Attitude and Practice of Menstrual Hygiene Management Among Junior High Schools Adolescent Females in the Yendi Municipality in the Northern Region of Ghana* discussed social norms and cultural practices surrounding menstruation means that most adolescents receive incomplete or inaccurate information on menstrual hygiene management (MHM). Although a majority of adolescent girls had knowledge of menstruation, less than a third had a positive attitude towards

menstruation or practiced appropriate menstrual hygiene management. This has been partly attributed to the negative socio-cultural norms and practices that stigmatize menstruation, lack of MHM materials and WASH facilities in schools, inadequate access to funds to purchase clean pads, and ignorance of menstrual hygiene management. Pranjal Sonowal and K. Talukdar, in *Menstrual Hygiene Knowledge and Practices amongst Adolescent Girls in Urban Slums of Dibrugarh Town*, highlighted the need for accurate and adequate information about menstruation and its appropriate management among adolescent girls. It is also important to educate adolescent girls about the issues related to their menstruation, so that they can safeguard themselves against various infections and diseases of the reproductive tract. So that adolescent girls become ready for the important physiological changes in their lives.

Menstruation is a natural process that occurs among girls between the ages of 11 and 14 years and is one of the indicators of the onset of puberty among them. Menstruation is a normal biological process and a key sign of reproductive health, yet in many cultures it is treated as negative, dirty, or sinful.

In Assamese culture and norms, on the onset of menarche, a girl is kept in confinement in a room for seven days and made to survive only on milk products, sprouts, and fruits. Taboos include not viewing men, not combing her hair, not visiting the prayer place, not cutting nails, or reading books. Also, married women are not allowed to sleep with their husbands due to the fear of the husband getting an incurable ailment. In Assam, there are rituals performed to declare the entry of a girl into womanhood, and this performance is known as *Shanti Biya* or *Tuloni Biya*. This performance is vital to the functioning of the Assamese society (Das, 2015).

In Nepali society, adolescent girls and women, as well, face unfair practices during menstruation as they are considered impure and dirty.

Universe of Study

Assam is one of the eight states of northeast India. Northeast India has to be understood differently and placed in the background of its geopolitical entity and historical context. Geographically, northeast is at the extreme north-eastern part of India, and has international boundaries with Bhutan, Tibet, China, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. The region is geographically isolated from the rest of India because its only land link with the rest of the country is through a narrow strip of land in the state of West Bengal. Therefore, the northeast is a geographically recognizable entity. For

that matter, the northeast is unique, making it distinct from mainland India in terms of its topography, climate, different ethnic groups, unique caste structures, races, and other groups, each having its own distinct culture and customs.

The present study was carried out in Amerigog, 10th mile, Guwahati, Jorabat area (Kamrup District), Assam. Amerigog under Kamrup district (Rural), India

Methods

The present study is mainly qualitative in nature, and the data were obtained by using an interview schedule. The study is based on qualitative research and uses FGDs and in-depth interviews to collect information. The present study was carried out in Amerigog, 10th mile, Guwahati, Kamrup Rural, Assam. The study was done among the Nepali adolescent girls (11-18 years), and 15 girls were interviewed as respondents.

Discussion

Menstruation is a natural physiological process that requires proper management. Unlike other normal bodily processes, menstruation is linked with religious and cultural meanings that can affect the perceptions of young girls as well as the ways in which the adults in the communities around them respond to their needs (Pathak, 2019). From the field observation, the ritual related to menstruation in Nepali society has significance according to their religion, caste, and ethnicity. From the field, it reveals that these practices are related to the concept of purity and pollution. It is observed that these practices have been practiced, believed, and followed from generation to generation. There are taboos on menstruation that adolescent girls or women have to follow.

Menstrual practices and hygiene: Restrictions during menstruation

During menstruation, different types of restrictions are seen in the area. Adolescent Girls practiced different restrictions during menstruation. Likewise, among them, girls do not attend any religious occasion/or marriage ceremony, do not play, do not do any household chores, girls sleep separately; in fact, they are not allowed to sleep in their bed sometimes, they sleep on the floor. Girls do not attend school. Again, there are many more restrictions like entering to kitchen, prohibition of eating certain food, visiting places of worship, touching trees and plants also. It is seen that girls usually sleep separately and sit separately from household members during menstruation. Adolescent girl receives these instructions of dos and don'ts from their mother and elder sister. According to the community, women or girls

should not do certain activities during menstruation, otherwise they will be cursed by God.

Type of menstrual absorbent used

From the field observation, it is seen that the majority of the girls use cloths rather than sanitary pads as menstrual absorbents. Most respondents use a piece of cloth to soak up the menstrual blood. Some are using a homemade pad made of Husk, and some use a Sack to soak the menstrual blood. However, the practices they have adopted are unsafe and unhygienic. From the field, it is seen that girls usually wash their clothes with detergent and soap. They dry the clothes inside the home in a dark place. They never dried used cloths in the sun and kept them in some secret place till the next menstrual period. In the study, it was found that among them, privacy maintenance was not so important. More than half of the respondents suffer from physical discomfort or pain, itching in the private parts.

School absenteeism

The study shows how poor menstrual hygiene leads to school absenteeism. It is seen that in that area, most schools do not have hygienic toilets for girls, hygiene and disposal facilities in school toilets, and running water facilities. This is the reason; the adolescent girls prefer to stay at home. The study found that girls remain absent from school during their menstrual periods. Absenteeism during menstruation has been reported because of financial problems, as they cannot buy sanitary pads, and, in the area, it is not commercially available. Again, the use of clothes as absorbents and the need to change them multiple times during school hours leads girls to avoid school. Many respondents used to remain absent from school for 5-6 days due to poor hygiene in the school.

Conclusion

The study reveals that menstruation is linked to so many taboos, belief systems, and restrictions on girls and women as well. Menstrual hygiene is also not properly maintained by the community due to ignorance, unsafe and unhygienic practices, superstition regarding menstruation, and illiterate mothers or a lack of proper health education. So, it is proved that poor menstrual hygiene and management are still prevailing in rural India. The study showed that women have a poor level of knowledge on hygiene, management of menstruation, they think that the restrictions related to menstruation are normal and accept them the way it is.

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