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No, do not, cannot, must not; be quiet - reexamining the rulings, restrictions and superstitions around menstruation.

“A cat visited the local temple and started living there. It often disturbed the pujari¹ in the middle of the puja², upsetting the puja vessels, drinking milk and eating the prasada³ items. This became a daily affair. The devotees advised the pujari to tie the cat. The pujari thus began a system, tying the cat, later releasing and feeding it after the puja was done. A few years later, the pujari died. When the new pujari took over, the devotees now advised him to tie the cat and he continued the routine. One day the cat died. The devotees and the pujari had gotten so used to a cat; they got another cat for the temple. The tradition continued for many years and to this day there is always a cat at this temple and it is tied before the puja begins. Local people say that it is bad luck to not tie a cat before a puja.” – Anon⁴

This story is about of how a situation turned into a practice which turned into a superstition. A practice may well start with initial logical reasoning, but when it is eventually followed without any thought or questioning it evolves into a strong belief. This is how a superstition is born along with strict sets of taboos, social and religious don't and do's.

India has many superstitions, taboos and rules around the subject of menstruation. It is one area that is shrouded in mystery, silence and shame. If we were to examine some of these we will realize that each region has its own sets of beliefs and rulings, however some are common across the different states of our country, whether rural, urban, rich or poor.

- Don't touch the pickle, it will get fungus.
- You are impure at this time, don't touch the *tulsi* plant, it is pure.
- Don't touch the water pot, you will pollute it.
- We emit negative energy since we are shedding blood and hence should not go to a holy positive energy place like a temple or religious books or light lamps
- Don't sleep on the mattress, you will pollute it, sleep on the floor.
- Don't let men see the menstrual cloth – they will get blind.
- Don't let your husband see the menstrual cloth, it will shorten his life.
- Don't bathe every day during this time; bathe once in for all after 4 days.
- Have some shame, hide matters about periods.
- Using cloth is old fashioned. Use sanitary napkins.
- You are not married – do not wear a tampon or menstrual cup

¹ Pujari - meaning - Temple priest

² Puja - worship

³ Prasad – food offering to the deity

⁴ This is a *Lok Katha* or folk tale, origin is unknown.

Where did all these come from, when and how did this start? A simple way is to investigate, asking the *where* and the *why*. In the areas where we work⁵, we asked young women where they had heard the don'ts and do's from. They said it is from their mothers, aunties, grandmothers and other female relatives and friends. Then we interviewed grandmothers and mothers to ask who told them to feel shame, not touch the pickle or water pot, they said their elders said so. Clearly no one gives any reason; no one has any scientific explanations, because no one has any logical answers to give. Additionally in the Indian context young people are not supposed to argue with or many a time even question their elders, so they remain silent and before long that same thought or belief is internalized and then practiced and then passed on to the next generation.

What are the repercussions of these beliefs? In southern Rajasthan for example, women chose a very dark coloured cloth to use during their periods, additionally they put it out to dry in a dark corner. In their perception it solves many issues, stains do not show, so men will not see. Actually this is detrimental to health. Stains never get completely washed out when using dark cloth, putting it to dry where there is no sun means the cloth is not sterilized properly. Societal acceptance is considered more important over one's own health, thus over all women's health gets compromised. There are other negative affects as well. If women are constantly told they are impure and dirty, the feeling of disgust about one self gets strongly ingrained and eventually one feels no self worth, women actually begin to believe they should not be touched.

Many scholars and activists have examined the roots and blind beliefs around shame, pollution, stigma and patriarchy around menstruation⁶. Some of these thinkers and scholars have explained this in a simple way. People from early civilizations could not fathom this occurrence of bleeding. While it was easy for them to perhaps understand urinating and defecating processes (waste from what you ate and drank had to pass out from your body), they could not understand how bleeding could occur every month and that too without any visible signs of injury. So the source of the bleeding was a mystery, they did not know where blood came from as they had limited knowledge about anatomy and internal organs. Thus they began to fear this blood, and in turn feared women during these days, feeling that women had some power that they as men did not (and could not) possess. Fear took yet another form, disgust. Blood began to be considered dirty and touching someone who was bleeding was believed to lead to some kind of contamination. What this contamination was - was nebulous and notional.

This fear of bleeding manifested itself in different way. Patriarchy⁷ dictated that women live separately at these times, a power move designed by men. The system of isolating women from

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⁶ Gloria Steinem, Germaine Greer, Janet Chawla, Kamala Bhasin, Christina Bobel are some scholars and activists who have analysed many of these issues at length.

⁷ Patriarchy meaning: A family, community, or society based and governed by men. Principles or philosophy, where control is by males.

the rest of the household began. Menstrual huts in Africa⁸, the “goat”⁹ in Uttrakhand in India, the *Chaupadi*¹⁰ in Nepal were the forms of shunning, stigmatizing and putting away, systems that still exist to this day. As societies grew, isolation took on other forms, staying away from the kitchen, being banned from attending religious functions, being banned from touching religious items and others.

Seeing matters from the start line, what is the medical story behind the occurrence of menstruation in adolescent girls and women? It is a biological expulsion, just like other body expulsions, like perspiration, saliva, phlegm, dandruff, tears, urine or feces. Menstruation is a flow of blood that occurs for 3 to 7 days every month. The only unique feature about this is that it happens to the female species. Blood emerges from an organ in the female body, the uterus. If pregnancy were to occur, this same blood cushions the fetus and protects it for nine months. If this blood was indeed dirty or filthy as it is believed, the growing baby will surely not survive!

But what about menstruation issues in today’s context of mobile telephones, computers and Mars Missions? Education has clearly not changed mindsets. Indian society still finds it difficult to speak about reproductive health, menstruation still causes people discomfort and embarrassment. Let us take the instance of commercial products. Shaving creams and toothpastes are purchased and brought openly, but with sanitary napkins it is a different story. The shopkeeper puts the packet in a black opaque plastic bag and women take it home this way. How many women can actually carry pads openly like they carry shampoo? The shopkeeper alone is not at fault here, it is a mindset change required from all angles. The reality is, there is much secrecy around the subject. We have documented over 50 words that are used as code words for periods, some of these are *chums*, *date*, *aunty has come*, *kapda*¹¹, *mu barnay hun*¹² and others. If we think about this more deeply, we can pin point where the secrecy and disapproval begins. A child for example is taught how to say ear, nose, eye, teeth, but never taught to say vagina or penis, so the code words begin at this stage – families have their own code words for reproductive organs and gets referred to as “susu”, “toto”, “titi”, “that part”, “over there” “private part” and so many different ways of naming organs . At an infant stage, children pick up this fact that these are secret spots and no one must speak about it.

The recent incident in Kerala is a point in case¹³ of mindsets. A bus conductor did not allow a woman to enter the bus as it was full of pilgrims going to *Sabrimalai*¹⁴ saying that it was reserved for men. The Kerala transport authorities later confirmed there is indeed no such thing as bus reservation for male pilgrims, the facility is for everyone. Take the other cases of

⁸ A common hut in the village, where all menstruating women live together.

⁹ The shed, where livestock is tied and managed, this is where women stay during their periods.

¹⁰ A system where women are exiled during those days, they sleep in animal sheds, caves or in the forests.

¹¹ *kapda* – cloth

¹² *mu barnay hun*- I am outside

¹³ <http://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/kochi/Woman-Alleges-Denial-of-Entry-on-KSRTC-Bus/2014/12/19/article2578061.ece>

¹⁴ The Hindu god *Ayappan* at *Sabarimalai* was celibate; girls and women in the reproductive age are thus banned from entering.

many temples across India with notice boards outside saying women are not allowed when they have their periods. Who decided this? Temple authorities – but who are these temple authorities? Men? Have they stopped to think that urine and feces stays inside the body for long hours, how is that not considered filthy, but pure blood coming from the uterus is considered impure? Have they ever thought about goddesses who also must have menstruated? Menstruation is simply used as an excuse for power over women.

Thinkers and activists have been addressing some of these issues since the past many years, but change is slow, and can occur only when communities put thought into what they hear, before blindly following meaningless concepts. There are many NGOs, Government programmes and funding agencies in India that support and work in the area of adolescent reproductive health. Their philosophy is that education and awareness initiatives must begin with young people and the interventions that are designed are a combination of raising awareness, giving the correct medical facts and helping young people to think critically about their own bodies to reexamine rules thrust upon them. MacArthur Foundation, UNFPA, Chetna – Ahmedabad, CINI and Thoughtshop Foundation – Kolkata, TARSHI – Delhi, Jatan Sansthan, Vikalpdesign, ARTH – Udaipur, Sahyog – Lucknow, Sangath – Goa, are some agencies that have been working for many years¹⁵ in the area of sexual and reproductive health and rights. The government of India also has adolescent health initiatives through the NRHM¹⁶ programme.

The question however is, as an individual **what can you do?** How can you be an agent of change? It begins with the individual, with ourselves. The first step is re-learning about menstruation; there are many books, websites and videos that explain all aspects in detail. Once you have seen all these you will be able to understand the subject clearly, be the judge of what is good or bad and make informed choices¹⁷. The second is to think about all the taboos and superstitions that one hears, all the rules that one is supposed to follow and apply some reasoning to those practices. For example if the rule is supposed to be “sleep on the floor not on a mattress” – give this deep thinking. The earlier reason for this ruling was perhaps a simple explanation; maybe the mattress had been newly purchased and a blood stain on a new mattress was not going to be pleasant. Change that practice, modify the reasoning in the current context, find an appropriate solution. An old thick bed sheet on a new mattress may do the trick! It is foolish to stain a brand new mattress, let us be practical, sheet staining can happen when you sleep! Not all rulings are bad, many things that our grandmothers said was indeed sensible.

¹⁵ There are many other agencies, only a few have been mentioned as examples

¹⁶ NRHM – National Rural Health Mission, a Government of India Health Programme

¹⁷ There are many other links. We mention a few:

- a. Mythri: Menstrual Hygiene Awareness - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gli7V2t_vol
- b. TARSHI – Talking About Reproductive and Sexual Health - <http://www.tarshi.net/downloads/blue-book.pdf>
- c. NHS – National Health Service, Government of UK
<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/periods/Pages/Introduction.aspx>
- d. Women’s Health – US Department Of Health and Human Services
<http://www.womenshealth.gov/publications/our-publications/fact-sheet/menstruation.html>

Going further with **what can you do**, an area that needs critical thinking is the use of products to manage periods. Due to deep rooted discomfort around issues of sex, sexuality and reproductive organs, menstrual products that require insertion like tampons and cups do not get any approval. The reality is that these products can still be used even if a user is not sexually active. The other area to look out for is media, the powerful opinion shaper. Multinational companies through very clever advertising reinforce notions of disgust, smell and shame. Advertisements tell you how you will stink during your period if you do not use their perfumed sanitary napkins. If a menstrual product is changed at least four times a day, there will be no smell, the advertisements will not tell you that! Other advertisements will tell you cloth is old fashioned. Old fashioned is good, cotton cloth¹⁸ is good, it is soft to skin, gives no rash, boils or allergy, it can breathe unlike the high technology disposable sanitary napkins made of polymers, gels and chemicals. Additionally cloth is bio degradable whereas disposable pads reach landfills and lie in the same condition for many hundred years¹⁹. **However, if using cloth, it should be white or light coloured so that the user is able to see what colour of fluids are being discharged**²⁰. Cloth / fabric based menstrual products must be washed out well and dried in the sun.

There are strong movements in India now looking at reusable and sensible options for menstruation. Reusing is always sustainable as it does not put massive negative impact on the environment like use and throw products do. Pre-stitched cloth pads are available on line and at stores.²¹ Thinkers have very wisely said – re-think, re-examine re-do, re-work, re-use, re-cycle. These writings have barely scratched the surface of the complex issues of menstruation. It is our responsibility as young people to question, to take responsibility and take charge of ourselves and our bodies. Change the rules of menstruation. Instead of “no, do not, cannot, must not; be quiet” – let us change it to “yes, do, I can, I must, I will and I will speak!”

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¹⁸ Never be afraid to use cotton cloth from *saris, dhotis, vhestis, lungis*. Follow the rules of washing well and drying in the sun and changing at least four times a day!

¹⁹ A user using disposable sanitary napkins alone will throw away at least 120 pads each year; these will never decompose and go back to earth.

²⁰ If discharge is yellow, green, very thick white curd like, accompanied by itching and bad smell – it is a sign of infection. This can be treated with medicines, see a doctor. Never feel embarrassed to discuss your menstrual problems.

²¹ *Ecofemme* (Auroville) www.ecofemme.org, *Uger pads* (Udaipur) www.jatansansthan.org/areaofwork/safe-menstrual-health-uger