

MENSTRUAL CUSTOMS AMONG THE HINDUS IN KASARAGOD

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Abstract

Menstruation is a significant turning point in the entire lifestyle of the female community. It is regarded as a sign of maturity towards womanhood. Many rituals and ceremonies associated with this biological process still exist in various parts of India. In South India, various community groups celebrate a girl's first menstruation in different ways. When a girl begins to menstruate, it is celebrated by a prominent ritual known as *Manjal Neerattu Vizha* in many areas of Tamil Nadu, *Peddamanishi Pandaga* in the regions of Andhra and Telangana and *Proudavasthe Kaarya* in some areas of Karnataka. In Kerala, the rituals related to the first Menstruation are known as "*Thirandukalyanam*", a four- to five-day ceremony celebrating the first menarche. These types of traditional rituals are prevalent among different social groups in the areas of North Malabar in Kerala, even today. The present study aims to discover the general beliefs, social customs, and practices among the Hindus in Kasaragod district related to menstruation and to explain how the people handled the first menstruation of a girl.

Key Words: - Menstruation, Beliefs, Rituals, Hindus, Kasaragod

Introduction

Many myths and taboos exist among the Hindus in Northern Malabar associated with Menstruation. The menstruating women are often secluded in separate rooms and prohibited from entering the kitchen, prayer rooms and sacred places. The older female member served food and water in separate vessels and was instructed to bathe in nearby lakes or rivers. Menstruating women are prohibited from performing religious rituals among the Hindus in Northern Malabar. It reflects the cultural perception of menstruation as impure. At the same time, different types of menstrual ceremonies are practiced by the Hindu people in North Malabar. Menstrual festivals are the hinge of a girl's life from a period of rapid physical growth, sexual contact, the activation of new desires and motives, as well as a wide range of social and affective changes and problems. A girl's menstrual health influences this phase's social and behavioural changes. More specifically, it is believed that pubertal menstruation is linked to activating social and motivational tendencies, which regulate behaviour and mood swings.

Many rituals exist in a person's life cycle, related to birth, naming, ringing, first menstruation, marriage, death, etc. Anthropologists used the term " *Rites of Passage* " to analyse a person's life situations in each period. Menstruation is an essential period in the *Rites of Passage*. It is a state of transition from childhood to adolescence. In Kerala, the "Prathamarthava "(first menstruation) ceremony is known locally by various names such as *Theendari Kalyanam, Thirandu Kalyanam, and Rutumati Kalyanam*. It is considered a matter of pride to perform the first menstruation of a girl. There was a custom in different parts of Kerala to isolate the menstruating girls in a separate room called *Theendaripura* or *Ayithapura*. During this time, the girl prepared the necessary food, or the homemade food was delivered to her room in a particular container. After menstruating, they went to the streams, pool, or river near the house and washed the clothes and mat used until then, and then they were admitted to the house. Menstrual belief in some societies considered menstruation as dirty and unclean. In these societies, menstruating women were not allowed to interact with men. Many taboos related to menstruation also exist in societies.

Menstrual huts existed among most of the tribal people in Kerala. Menstrual huts were also known by many names among different tribal groups. *Vannakura* (of the Mannan caste), *Gudha* (of the Kattunaikkan caste), *Wa Pura* (of the Mutuvan caste), *Ethathepatti* (of the Katar caste) etc., are the examples of menstrual huts in Malabar. Although women are not interested in staying in menstrual huts, this tradition is kept only with the intention of the virtue of society. Historically, many prohibitions were imposed on women as a part of the attempt to establish patriarchy in society. One of them is that menstruating taboos arose out of men's desire to suppress women in society during this time of seclusion.

Many scholars' theories that man's primal fear of blood is the reason for attempting to make superstitions related to menstruation. Historian Robert Mc Elvaine observes that men's reproductive jealousy is the root cause of hatred and taboos about menstruation. Menstrual taboos and impurity are the mental construction of a patriarchal society. Until the early decades of the 20th century, society believed that menstrual blood was poisonous. It was undoubtedly established in the modern period that this was false and baseless. When we examine this, it can be seen that different societies have formed menstrual concepts differently at various times. Its basis is sometimes related to unknown fears or the customs prepared by the patriarchal institutions.

We can find many rituals associated with menstruation in different parts of Northern Kerala. The Scheduled Tribes like Mogar, Velan, Pulayaan, Byran Chaklia, Nalikedaya (Kopalan), Vannan, Malayan, Bakudan, Parayaan, Pulluvan, Madiger etc., the Scheduled Castes like Koragar, Malakutier, Mavilan, Vetuvan, Malavedan, Malayarayan, Malavettuvan and Ullalan. And the Backward Communities like Saliyas, Maniyanis, Thiyyas, Vaniyas, Kusavas, Vishwakarma, etc., in Kasargod district celebrate a girl's first menstruation with different rituals. It is related to their caste regulations and local customs. Menstrual rituals were widely celebrated among the Vettuvar tribes of northern Kerala. *Thirandu Kalyanam* is a ritualistic ceremony performed by the Vettuvar people after a girl reaches her first menstruation. In the first menstruation period, she lives alone in a tent for seven days. On the seventh day, the elder women in the family advised the girl to bathe in the nearest river. She should be anointed with oil on her head and dip in the river three times. Then, a new dress will be given to the girl. They celebrate the first menstruation of a girl with family members and neighbours by offering sweets and feasts. The ceremony known as '*Mudarch Burni*' is significant among the Koraga caste when the girl reaches puberty. *Mullu Muttune* was the ritual conducted by the Koppalar/Nalkadayar caste groups in Kasaragod related to a girl's first menstruation. A Malakudi girl's first period of puberty is called *Ponchomatini or Madimmalayal*, and it is performed with much fanfare. The rituals of Malavedar are very diverse, and there is a special ceremony among them after the girl reaches her first period. This seven-day ceremony is known as *Charakadam ozhukkal*. The Mavilan and Parayan communities in Hosdurg taluk celebrate the first Menstruation in the form of *Thirand Kalyanam*. A girl who is menstruating among the Koppalas is called *Mugarar*. The Baira community in northern Kasargod performs a ritual called *Gangai Puja* to purify the girl after menstruation. Unlike other communities, the first menstrual bathing of a Madiga caste girl, who is called *Rithumati*, should be done by the virgin girls of their community. On this occasion, the *Rithumati* should be honoured by the elders by offering betel leaves and areca nuts. The Madigars conducted *Janapooja* on the twelfth day of the first menstruation. In the *Vannan* community, menstruating women should stay in a place outside the house called *Pallapura* for six days. Neither seeing men nor eating home-cooked food is strictly practised on these days. Food and drinks have to be prepared by her. In the Saliya community, the first menstruating girl is known as *Pushpini*. They conducted the first menstrual ceremony,

vayassariyikkal, in which the family members and neighbours offered sweets to the girl. After the seventh day, the girl prepares “*chakkara choru*’ (sweet rice) and gives it to all the neighbouring and family houses. It is a sign that reveals the girl's first menstruation in the family, and then the wedding plans for the girl begin. This system is the same, with minor differences among other backward community groups like Maniyanis, Thiyyas, Vaniyas, Kusavas, Vishwakarma, etc., in the Kasaragod district. It is also a common practice among all the community groups in Kasaragod to seclude the women during the time of menstruation.

There are a lot of emotions associated with the menstrual customs. Women have been facing loneliness, sadness, the feeling of avoidance, and discrimination. Women felt disappointed while left alone at home in the name of menstruation, even when an important family celebration was occurring. The practice of untouchability and tent stay during periods is similar among all the community groups in Northern Malabar. The community does not consider women's emotions, feelings, and difficulties. These cultural practices impact women's daily lives, which results in loneliness, low mood, and sadness among women. There are so many restrictions imposed by the community over menstruating women. Their mobility and interaction with the outside world is restricted. Women belonging to all the communities are kept out of the view of male members in the house during the menstrual period. Women are not allowed to enter temples during this period. It is believed that the deity will punish those who try to make any changes in this regard.

Conclusion

There are many rituals related to menstruation in Northern Malabar. When a girl has her first menstruation, society celebrates various rituals. It is a seven-day ceremony, but sometimes, it is different in specific regions according to the customs of the caste groups. Menstrual rituals and ceremonies are still every day in the conservative Hindu communities in Kasaragod. Even though the menstruation days are more difficult for women, they bear all this to keep traditional customs alive. Women lose their freedom during menstruation. The menstruating women are often secluded in separate rooms and prohibited from entering the kitchen, prayer rooms and sacred places. Menstruating women are also excluded from performing religious rituals among the Hindus in Northern Malabar. However, the educated new generation of girls rejects menstrual rituals and starts to question the traditional menstrual customs and practices. Education and new advertisements created proper awareness about the superstitions and customs related to

menstruation. The gradual cultural diffusion has also resulted in slight changes in the habits and lifestyle of the women's community. Menstruation is quite a natural, normal, and biological process experienced by all adolescent women. However, the menstrual rituals are still practiced by the conservative Hindu community groups in some regions of the Kasaragod district.

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