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MENSTURAL HEALTH MANAGEMENT AND SOCIETAL IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract:

Women bleed to create; males bleed to destroy. Even though it is the twenty-first century, menstruation is still viewed as unclean and filthy in all of India. Women have become silent victims of such subjects since open conversation about them is not encouraged. Many Indian communities previously saw menstruation as a blessing. Women who are menstruation, like Kamakhya Devi, are revered as goddesses, as though society is in awe of the fact that they can let blood flow from their bodies without dying. Menstruation is a typical, natural biological occurrence, and the government and other civil society groups work to increase public understanding of it. Speaking openly about periods is still frowned upon in the nation despite these attempts for awareness and educational measures. Menstrual hygiene is still one of the most disregarded problems that Indian women encounter since it is taboo. This paper advocates for the Menstruation Leave Policy and encourages gender sensitization while focusing on the menstrual discomfort and suffering associated with menstruation or mood swings.

Key Words: *Hygiene, Taboo, Myths and Truths, menstruation leave, Menstruation hygiene*

Introduction:

Mesturation is not always considered as a curse in India rather it is celebrated as a natural and divine process. This phase is considered auspicious when women are glorified for being fertile. In some parts of India, there is a ritual for celebrating the first period of the girl in Assam and Odissa as a mark of their fertility. Mesutration is also associated with the divine energy of mother goddess in Assam where holy tmeple of *Mother Kamakhya* celebrates the godess's mensutration every year in the month of June. '*Rajo Festival'* in Orissa is the another example of this tradition to honour the goddess earth's mesturation during monsoon[1]. In South Indian tradition, the first period is celebrated as *Ritu Kala Samskaram*[2]. On contrary to this, there are texts who are considering the women during their menstrual cycle as impure. Historical narratives delivers the dual interpretations of mensutarion in ancient India. Also the concept of pure and impure associated with the patriarchal structure of society as a control mechanism tool to control women's role and sexuality. In cross-cultural studies, the mensutration taboos are universal which is based on the notion of uncleanliness as compared to traditional societies which symbolises women as

[1]https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/travel/things-to-do/this-interesting-festival-of-odisha-celebrates-menstruation/articleshow/80271418.cms

[2] Jaiswal, Vaibhav (January 2015). "Garbhadana Samaskara: A Scientific Review: Pharma Science Monitor". *Pharma Science Monitor*. pp. 220–223

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protective and empowered. Considering her impure, the women during her cycle not even allowed to touch the cow as cow will become infertile. Having such belief system has no scientific attestation. Such restrictions imposed on the women causes a huge restrictions on their mental, emotional, psychological and social growth.

For 1.8 billion girls, women, and non-binary persons of reproductive age, menstruation happens once a month and is a natural aspect of life[3]. When a girl begins to menstruate for the first time at the start of puberty, this phase is known as menarche[4]. Menarche may ocring godess's mensutration in a woman between the ages of 9 and 16[5]. Most ladies become aware of their initial bleeding at this time. Bleeding becomes a regular occurrence in a girl's life if a cycle of bleeding lasts 28–40 days. Girls have hundreds of eggs in their ovaries when they are born. Every month, or roughly every 21 to 40 days, one egg leaves one of the ovaries and travels through a fallopian tube. The process through which the egg leaves the ovary is known as ovulation. When the egg passes through the fallopian tube, the uterus's lining transforms into a supple, layer. The majority of its lining is made up of tiny blood vessels. The lining of the uterus will serve as the baby's food supply while it grows within if an egg and sperm unite to become an embryo or baby. If the egg is not paired with a sperm, the uterine lining begins to rip. Blood seeps from the vagina as a result of the ripped lining.During this period, menstrual bleeding takes place, and the entire cycle is referred to as menstruation. For the best chance of getting pregnant during fertile days, which are the days before to ovulation (when your ovary releases a mature egg), the menstrual cycle is essential. The effects of menstruation on girls' and women's health include irregular periods, painful periods, heavy periods, and premenstrual syndrome (PMS) symptoms such as oligomenorrhoea, secondary amenorrhoea, polymenorrhoea, hypermenorrhoea, and dysmenorrhoea. The bulk of symptoms that appear 10 days before menstruation and disappear after menstruation starts are referred to as premenstrual symptoms. It may result in a number of symptoms, including mood changes, sadness, and sore breasts. Women's hygiene-related behavior during menstruation is crucial since it has an impact on their health by increasing their susceptibility to RTIs. If women and girls are to live healthy, purposeful lives with dignity, they must be able to properly regulate monthly bleeding. This calls for having access to sufficient water, sanitation, and hygiene services, including facilities for disposing of old sanitary products and pads as well as clean water for washing and a place to dry garments used to absorb menstrual blood.

Myths or Truths Related to Menstruation in India

Culturally, women are bombarded with lots of restrictions and taboos during their menstrual cycle. The bulk of period myths are incorrect, supported by superstition, gender inequality, and limits on women's activity. Ovulation, as far as science is concerned, is what really causes menstruation, which is subsequently followed by endometrial bleeding, a missed opportunity for conception, and cycle preparation for the next cycle. There doesn't seem to be any evidence to support the notion that women who are menstruating are "impure," therefore. Due to their menstruation, many young women and girls have restrictions in their everyday life. For urban females, avoiding the "puja" room is the major restriction, whereas accessing the kitchen is the main restriction

[3]https://www.unicef.org/documents/guidance-menstrual-health-and-hygiene

[4] Rees M. The age of menarche. ORGYN. 1995;(4):2-4. [PubMed]

[5] ibid

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for rural girls during menstruation. Rigid food restrictions are also maintained in some parts of India. It is believed that some meals might hinder or even stop menstrual flow. Menstruation-related taboos, which are pervasive in many cultures, affect girls' and women's mental health, attitudes, ways of living, and, most importantly, health.

Ayurveda is based on the principles of Vata, Pitta and Kapha i.e. motion, heat and stability. During the mensutration, the Vata and Pitta increases naturally to manage the changes in the body. When Vata and Pitta are high, then body needs rest. As a result the women are restricted to take bath in cold water, running around, taking head bath because of the heat generated in the body need the balance and rest. As per Ayurveda, mensturation is a detoxification mechanism not impurity and suggests certain Ahaar and Vihaar i.e. diet and lifestyle practices during the cycle. As a result, they are not allowed to eat acidic foods, like pickles. Girls who are menstruating usually steer clear of sour foods like curd, tamarind, and pickles. As far as temple restriction on Mesurating women are concerned, temples are the centers of powerful spiritual of energies and women's body is going through the shift of energies and already balancing her own energy during that period. So the strong vibrations in the temple may not put any harm or discomfort to the women so the restrictions on temple entry was imposed on women during their mensturation cycle. Women are not allowed to take bath for the first few days to protect the water bodies.

Government Efforts for Menstrual Hygiene:

Various initiatives on mensturation hygiene are addressed by the government of India. Ministry of Health and and Family Welfare has undertaken the scheme in 2011 in 107 districts of 17 states to promote menstrual hygiene among girls living in rural areas between 10-19 years[6]. Menstrual hygiene management (MHM) is the term used to describe the practice of using a clean menstrual management material to absorb or collect blood that can be changed in private as often as necessary for the duration of the menstrual cycle, using soap and water to wash the body as needed, and having access to facilities to dispose of used menstrual management materials. Every year on May 28, Menstrual Hygiene Day is observed to promote awareness of the need to maintain good menstrual hygiene[7]. The day is observed on May 28 since menstrual cycles normally last 28 days and individuals menstruate five days each month on average. To eradicate taboos around menstruation, raise awareness of the need to manage menstrual hygiene properly on a worldwide scale. In several states, the government has made an effort to promote menstrual hygiene:

In June 2011, the Indian government launched a new scheme in rural Gujarat, India, to offer sanitary pads in select regions for a reduced cost of Rs 6 per pack of six (MHS (National Health Mission)[8]. Accredited social health activists (ASHAs) are these front-line healthcare workers.

The Menstruation Benefits Bill 2017 was proposed in Parliament by Arunachal Pradesh's Ninong Ering to provide two days of menstruation leave every month to both public and private employees[9].

[6]https://nhm.gov.in/nammamihaan/index1.php?lang=1&level=3&sublinkid=1021&lid=391#:~:text=The%20Ministry%20of%20Health%20and,in%20an%20environmentally%20friendly%20manner

[7] https://www.cdc.gov/hygiene/about/menstrual-hygiene.html#:~:text=Menstrual%20Hygiene%20Day,period%20education%2C%20and%20sanitation%20facilities.

[8]https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11800975/#:~:text=With%20growing%20concern%20for%20adolescents,MHS%20scheme%20in%20rural%20India.

[9] Ering presents Menstruation Benefit Bill, 2017 https://arunachaltimes.in/index.php/2018/01/03/ering-presents-menstruation-benefit-bill

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Kerala complies with women's rights to menstrual leave and free access to menstrual hygiene products. Under the Bill of 2022, women and transgender people are entitled to three days of paid leave throughout the menstrual cycle[10].

Karnatka State Government also notified the menstrual leave policy, allowing one day leave a month, for the Women in the age group of 18 to 52 years[11]. The policy will be applicable for permanent, contractual or outsources workers. There are some other government schemes and initiatives to improve Menstrual Hygiene Management such as Rashtriya Kishore Swasthya Karyakram, SABLA program by Ministry of Women and Child Development, Swach Bharat Mission and Swach Bharat: Swach Vidyala[12].

Girls and women should have access to menstrual hygiene, hence changing the menstrual hygiene situation in India requires immediate and strong action from all key parties. Most research emphasized awareness and practices of menstrual hygiene. Subjects had cycles that lasted 25 to 30 days and had menstrual periods that ranged from 2 to 5 days in length on average. Menstruation is still considered taboo and is heavily impacted by cultural norms, familial, societal, and religious expectations, as well as by personal choices, socioeconomic pressures, and social and economic position.

Discussion:

Menstrual hygiene is crucial because it has an impact on women's health, self-esteem, and confidence. It also relates to gender equality and basic human rights. Numerous concerns call for coordinated multispectral inputs and interventions to dispel social taboos, myths, and misconceptions, support innovative sustainable solutions to produce and distribute cost-effective, high-quality sanitary pads, and address the expanding problem of disposing of menstrual waste in an environmentally safe manner. There is a need to follow a strategic approach to combat the myths and taboos associated with menstruation among the girls' and women folk. The most importantly, there must be raising awareness among the girls' related to menstrual health and hygiene. These girls' are not having the access of the right knowledge about menstrual health as mothers and women in the family often shy to discuss the issu with them which resulted limited knowledge. This leads to poor menstrual health and hygiene. There must be community based activities to spread awareness on menstrual health and hygiene at school level and village level.

Women literacy also plays an important role to overcome the societal and cultural bondages. Educating the women is equal to empowering the women. Women and girls are often excluded in decision making roles because of their low literacy level. Increasing the education level of these women provides them an opportunity to improve their role in the society and they can have access the better health services.

Low cost or free sanitary napkins distribution in slum and rural areas can be the another initiative to improve the menstrual hygiene of the girls as in these areas it is difficult to have access of these napkins.

2017/#:~:text=NEW%20DELHI%2C%20Jan%202:%20Member,employers%20in%20terms%20of%20production.

[10] THE RIGHT OF WOMEN TO MENSTRUAL LEAVE AND FREE ACCESS TO MENSTRUAL HEALTH PRODUCTS BILL, 2022, https://sansad.in/getFile/BillsTexts/LSBillTexts/Asintroduced/276%20of%202022%20as%20introduced84202375127PM.pdf?source=legislation#:~:text=The%20need%20is%20to%20ensure,non%2Dworking%20women%20including%20students.

[11] Karnataka govt. notifies menstrual leave policy with a day's leave a month https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/karnataka-govt-notifies-menstrual-leave-policy-with-a-days-leave-a month/article70272362.ece#:~:text=The%20Karnataka%20government%20has%20notified%20a%20menstrual,*%20Increasing%20women%20participation%20in%20the%20workforce

[12] Menstrual Hygiene Management Programming in Maharashtra: The journey of a decade, https://www.unicef.org/rosa/media/11831/file

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Increasing the male sensitivity and awareness is also required to confront the taboos and ignorance on this deep rooted problem. Men should be considered equal partner and their role can not be underestimated. Sensitization of health workers, Aaganwadi worker must be done for the dissemination of knowledge. Also providing adequate rest breaks during working hours to mensturation workers, free emergency relief, pain management, medical care, fliexible working condition, facility to work from home or to take short breaks may help to create congenial working conditions.

Though India does not have menstrual leave policy, but some states are in process of implementing the policy. A few private companies are offering it voluntarily. Recently, Supremen Court has instructed the Centre ae few coual government to frame the menstrual leave policy for the female employees[13]. In the global era, there are countries having implemented the menstrual leave such as Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Spain, Phillipines, Taiwan, Vietnam and Zambia[14]. In India, **Right of Women to Menstrual Leave and Free Access to Menstrual Health Products Bill, 2022** has been proposed to provide three days of paid leaves for women and transwomen druing menstruation., however, the PIL has been disposed of by the Supreme Court by way of order dated 24-2-2023[15].

These initiative helps to priorities health and well being of women. It would help to reduce the stigma and normalise the menstruation. This will help to boost the work performance, bridge the gender gap and increase work place inclusivity.

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[14] https://www.indiatoday.in/visualstories/education/6-countries-offering-menstrual-leaves-84568-27-12-2023 https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK565643/

[15] https://www.scconline.com/blog/post/2023/03/07/looking-beyond-the-law-the-case-of-menstrual-leave-in-india/

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