

Blood and Social System: Battle of “Purity” And “Impurity”

Lina Baniya

Researchers, Dignity Without Danger, Department of Sociology, Tribhuvan University

Mensuration practices have **many** systems. This rapid ethnographic research is about the Nepalese women practices during mensuration. It has multiple procedures of interviews (In-depth, **Key** and Focus group discussion) conducted in the different 4 provinces and 7 districts in the Nepalese society. It reveals subjective experiences of women’s menstrual knowledge, perception, restriction, and practices. Cultural and religious variation of mensuration practices show that it is guided by cultural and religious system. This paper is focused on the Hindu to Buddhist women's menstruation practices. Dialogue of women, men dhama, priest politician, social workers report that they are not very sure with the impurity but cannot say “it is pure”, as the cultural/religious and social system has confusing approach. Religious text and the religious leaders have idea of “impurity” however particular evidence is not to prove.

A menstruating woman cannot touch anyone; if anyone touches her, the person needs to be purified by taking a bath and drinking cow’s urine. Specifically, she is not allowable to touch pregnant women or trees, because of the idea that the “fruit” each are bearing will die or will be malformed (Water Aid in Nepal 2009). I found totally opposite cultural practices of menstruation between Buddhist and Hindu religion. Mensuration blood and menstruating body are “pure” or “impure” appearance in the debate and fighting with each other. Layers of disciplines are merging to build mensuration restriction rules however it is in debate whether it is pure or impure and practices varies in different religion. Hindu religious text, leaders indicate mensuration is the crush given by God to the women body whereas Buddhism ignores and says it is the "time of purity" I have captured mixed views on practices debating it is "pure or impure". Numerous voices are advocating about these issues however this is it unclear that how battle of purity and impurity ends up?

Key words: menstruation, knowledge, perception, practices, restriction, participants

Introduction

Menstruation has always been restricted by various perceptions. Somewhere, it has some openness, but differences in attitude continue between countries, cultures, religions, and ethnic groups (Mahon & Fernandez 2010, Water Aid in Nepal 2009). In many low-income countries, women and girls are restricted in mobility and behavior during menstruation due to their “impurity” during menstruation. In many parts of the world, menstruation is still related to several cultural taboos as well as feelings of shame and un-cleanliness (George 2012). Even today menstruation is an unrevealed between mother and daughter in many families. I understand menstruation is a normal natural miracle for females still it is associated with some mark of sufferings & embarrassment. No doubt, menstruation is biological process but functions for society, and our Nepalese society has defined it in term of "impurity" however some small communities define as it is a "purity". There is big fight regarding its purity and impurity, but then again majority of population and community define it as an impurity. In Nepalese vernacular, the word Mahinawari Nachune or Para Sareko is commonly uses to address menstruation which means untouchable (in Nepali, chhuna nahue). Though menstruation is a natural organic phenomenon, it is considered as an impurity in majority of Nepalese community. The phenomenon is deeply encompassed in a concatenation of false myths, beliefs, and socio-cultural restrictions, often leading to neglect of the menstruation-related practices and disorders, especially in a developing country. Taboos are responsible for the hesitation, shyness, and fear in sharing problems, which is commonly faced by the young girls. (UN 2013).

Nepal is a multi-ethnic, multilingual, and multi-cultural country with a population of about 29 million. Many people are Hindu (81.34% of the total population), followed by Buddhist (9.03%), Islam (4.4%), and other religions (5.23%) census 2011). Menstruation is perceived differently in various religions and cultures. While there is some of the evidence written in Hindu scriptures to characterize menstruation, however, Hindus consider women and girls to be impure, untouchable, and undesirable during menstruation. One of the most extreme forms of menstrual seclusion practice in Nepal is Chhaupadi, comes from ancient Hindu scriptures that consider secretions associated with menstruation and childbirth to be religiously “impure,” deeming women “untouchable,” and prohibiting menstruating women and girls from inhabiting public space, socializing with others, and sharing food and water sources. Although beliefs and practices are gradually changing, even today, in many parts of the country, women and girls either are forced to spend three to four days outside of their homes, often in sheds, or in a separate room or area while they are menstruating.

The awkwardly framed image of menstruation as an offensive in many societies and the stigma revolving around it have created an invisible shield inhibiting research into the different social

and cultural facets of menstruation (Seymour 2008). This image also retards advancement in social science research toward identifying and understanding menstruation, from a social and cultural perspective. Insufficient research on this issue in Nepalese context and its dissemination has given way to inaccurate information and understanding about menstruation and menstrual hygiene practices to prevail. Lack of information and misinformation about menstruation fosters irrational societal restrictions and taboo practices on the menstruating woman. Socio-cultural guidance and religious influences make the menstruation period an impure time frame.

According to Standing and Parker (2017:156), ‘menstruation is a natural and regular occurrence experienced by nearly all women of reproductive age. The average woman will have about 450 menstrual cycles over approximately 38 years of her life. Yet, it is almost a universal experience for menstruation to be a cultural taboo and for women to be stigmatized at menstruation (Crawford, Menger & Kaufman 2014, Standing & Parker 2017). In Nepal, particularly in Hindu communities, ‘menstrual pollution’ beliefs are widespread (Bennett 2002; Cameron 1998; Crawford, Menger & Kaufman 2014). While menstruation pollution beliefs vary among different religions, class, social status, and caste, traditionally women are viewed as polluting during menstruation and childbirth regardless of their caste (Standing & Parker 2017). In Buddhist communities, menstruation is a natural and normal physiological process (Jnanavira 2006; Ranabhat et al. 2015).

Methods of Data Collection

This research led the Dignity Without Danger ‘East’, Team. I got the opportunity to be the part of this research in ‘Menstruation’, organized by TU in collaboration with SOAS, University, and Liverpool University UK “. East team, who visited the 4 provinces (8 districts) of Nepal, held in February 2018 to July 2019. Researchers were from the different background which made the field work interesting. Different areas (religious, cultural) have different practices which is caught by research.

According to Bogdan and Biklen (1997:11), “The process of data analysis is like a funnel: Things are open at the beginning and more directed and specific at the bottom”. Similarly, in Patton (2000) qualification, qualitative analysis lies in making sense of massive amounts of data, reducing the volume of raw materials, identify substantial patterns and assembling a framework for data reveal. In the process of data, analyze, at first, I recorded interviews through a deeper and intense process like word by words or line by line repeatedly into meaningful sentences based on the research questions. Then, raw data were categorized based on response and interpretations of participants. The presentation and analysis of the finding are organized in a thematic order which emerged from the research question and its objectives. Data is collected, presented, and analyzed from interviews and related documents to menstruation according to the theme.

This qualitative study typically includes case studies, and generally descriptive studies. The intent of qualitative research is to understand a particular social situation, event, role of interaction. It is largely an investigative process where the researcher gradually makes sense of a social phenomenon of contrast, comparing, replicating, cataloguing, and classifying the object of study (Creswell 2003:198). Qualitative research methods typically include interviews and observation, but may also include case studies, discussion, and historical and document analyses. Therefore, qualitative data collected for making the research study comprehensive. Qualitative data generated directly from meeting and talking with the Participant and documenting their experiences whose narrative accounts about menstruation and rituals contribute to this research for making valid.

To gather rich and in-depth data, a range of primary data collection methods were used by the research team, including face-to-face in-depth interviews, key informant interviews and focus group discussions. In this research there were 150 interviews including male participants and 8 focus group discussion. participants were from various religious and cultural background. priest Lama teachers, farmers, housewives' businessperson, students all were participated between the age 18 to 60. Additionally, observation and field diaries kept by the researchers helped to capture the context and detail of the research and taking photographs to help contextualize the research findings and researchers emotional and actual experiences of the location. One is the deeply embedded stigma and taboos associated with menstruation, another is liberal practices of the Buddhist religious people is the role played by Hindu religious texts in maintaining menstrual restrictions and the focus on misfortune being brought to another, particularly male members of the family, and finally evidence that practices are not 'rigid' but are changing over time.

Research Questions

How the religious and cultural ideology setups the mensuration practices?

Is there any variation following mensuration practices?

Pure Galaxies and Impure Bodies

The body is an over-determined site of power for feminists as well as for Foucault; a surface inscribed with culturally and historically specific practices and subject to political and economic forces. Bordo (1993) points out that feminism that first inverted the old metaphor of the 'body politic' to talk about the politics of the body: the human body is itself a politically inscribed entity, its physiology and morphology shaped by histories and practices of containment and control (Bordo1993). Woman has been measured and judged against the norm of man, the essential human subject, the active, strong, and moral half of a human whole (Bailey 1993). Biological deviation from the male standard marks women as biologically inferior; as victims of a pathological physiology (Balsamo 1996). Aristotle regarded the female as being afflicted with natural defectiveness. Women are the 'other half'; necessary evils for reproduction (Bailey 1993) and the opposite against which the male can compare himself favorably.

The idea of men and women as opposites is supported by polarized categories such as mind-body, culture-nature, spirit-matter that have been inflected with gender ideologies. In the mind/body dualism the body and mind are regarded as quite separate, the body is merely the crude container of the mind. Mind and reason are superior to the emotions and senses and divorced from one another. Man is mind and represents culture: the rational, unified, thinking subject; woman is body and represents nature: irrational, emotional and driven by instinct and physical need. Woman's association with body/nature is strengthened by biological essentialist and determinist paradigms which define woman according to her reproductive physiology. She is thus feeble and passive, literally a receptacle for the desires of the male and incubator for his offspring; a creature driven by emotion and instinct; a slave to her reproductive organs. Man may be able to transcend his biological materiality, but woman is entrenched in her physicality - "a thing sunk deeply in its own immanence" (de Beauvoir 1988:189). Woman as other is inferior but also unknowable, enigmatic, and disquieting. She represents that which must be investigated and dissected until her secrets are relinquished. Consequently, the female body has been subjected to the scrutinizing gaze of the human sciences far more than the male. Every hint of abnormality has been thoroughly and enthusiastically ferreted out and classified by numerous 'experts' eager to provide indisputable proof of its inherent pathology. Its uncontrolled sexuality must be contained, and inherent weakness of character exposed, particularly as it is primarily a reproductive body.

There is no denying that what constitutes pure and impure within any cultural context is largely defined for entire communities (Ten 2007). The demarcation of pure and polluted becomes more precise as it travels down the population chain from larger communities to smaller community or village, to even family units, and finally to the individual who then exhibits individualized configurations of pure and impure composite (Sharma 2006). In Hindu context, purity comes in two principal vintages: first, bodily purity which expands beyond the cleanliness facet into the realm of ceremonial behavior and its meaning, and second is purity of mind. In our social cultural context, temple, kitchen, worship room, garden is takes places as the pure space where menstruated women are not allowed to enter. During the interview time, I asked to participants, do you visit temple? At 27 years old participant made the following comments:

"My grandmother used to tell me that we are dirty during menstruation. When I was little, I did not understand what she meant. When I had my first period, I understood the reason, why we don't go to temples and don't engage in festive ceremonies because we are dirty. The temple is a clean place. It is a place where we go to pray to the Gods who help us get rid of unclean thoughts, unclean acts, and unclean behaviors. If I am a Hindu, then I must be fully able to call myself a Hindu. Doing all these things to remember Gods but not the menstruation rituals, no, no, that is not right. Not for me, not for God. Her understanding is, menstrual blood is impure, and with impure body we should not enter the pure places, if it is pure, it would have remained inside our body as it is impure it flows out, impure blood harms us.

Again, a 36-year-old participant had a convoluted way of making sense of this embodied impurity. In her words:

"So much dirt comes out of our body. If the body wanted it, it would keep it. That it is getting rid of, it means that our body is temporarily impure. You should not do anything related to God during that period. You can't go to the temples, Gumba and any other places .

The use of words 'impurity' and 'harmful' indicate that girl has already inculcated some negative ideas about menstruation. Other girls described menstrual blood as 'dirty' and 'bad blood' and thus justified their isolation. Menstruation is a normal biological event experienced over much of the lifespan and, thus, is a recurrent feature of women's lives. A striking and virtually universal feature of menstruation is that it is culturally stigmatized. Menstruated women were believed to be temporarily dangerous, which led to numerous restrictions to limit their contact with certain objects, people and other living beings (Delaney, Lubton, and Toth 1988). The belief in menstruation as a source of pollution and danger has persisted into the modern era: a World Health Organization (WHO) survey of women from 10 countries showed that some cultures consider menstruating women impure and place restrictions on their social or religious lives (Snowden and Christian 1983; WHO 1981). 31 years old participant said:

'I follow the practice for myself. God is there, I know. But more than God, the practice of menstruation is important for me. I want to be clean. I can also be a sincere follower if I follow all the restrictions. So even though I cannot follow all the restrictive elements of the rituals, I do whatever is possible. I don't visit temples and attain other religious functions.'

Women who follow the restrictions in one form another, the general perception of the menstruating body as embodying impurity. During an interview, a 48-year participant remarked:

"Dirty blood comes out from our body; your body is in an impure state. If according to the mythic stories, we are indeed getting rid of the sin of the death of a God, then we should look at the period to cleanse ourselves. And if we believe this is a cleansing action, then we also must admit that what is being cleansed is junk. Now, I am not going to risk taking that dirty body to a temple. I can stay away from a temple for four days, and I can gladly stay out of the kitchen for four days."

This participant shared her bitter experiences in this way.

During menstruation, she is "impure" or "unclean". During periods she regarded as an untouchable by her family members. She once went to clean herself and her clothes in a nearby stream, but the villagers and family members accused her of making the stream impure. After several weeks, the problem was rectified, but not until she had assured her fellow villagers that she would not repeat her actions in the future. She doesn't have hope

that her situation will change after marriage, saying, family doesn't consider or support us during that period, and however we are daughters and sisters. Why would the in-laws give us support when the daughters-in-law are considered secondary? She believes that this practice is a result of traditional beliefs, taboos, and practices. The community believes that if anything is touched by a menstruating woman, it becomes impure and may cause harm to others. If they touch something accidentally, then the item should be cleaned immediately to make it reusable. If the women touch their husband or other family members, then those touched must bathe to cleanse themselves of impurities. During these periods, she feels as if she is an animal and, for this reason, wants to share her experience.

Mensurating body and blood never been considered as a natural/physical function in majority of Nepalese context. several areas (kitchen, temple trees plants celebrations, festivals) are considered as purity whereas menstruation is impure, and the boundaries has created to the mensurating body that with blood no entry is permitted. There is religious cultural order for women that you are bleeding which is that is why you must follow the restrictions and traditions.

Foucault's theories have been useful to feminism in their challenge to paradigms of western thought taken for granted since the Enlightenment. He critiques the classical ways of thinking about the subject as a rational, unified being with a fixed core or essence, arguing that: "Nothing in man - not even his body - is sufficiently stable to serve as a basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men" (Foucault 1991).

Religious variations

Different culture's understanding menstruation in different ways. The basis of many conduct norms and communication about menstruation in western industrial societies is the belief that menstruation should remain hidden. By contrast, in some countries and societies, menstrual performances are viewed in a negative way. It is taken as an impurity and uncleanness.

In Hinduism, menstruating women are traditionally advised rules to follow. During menstruation, women are advised not to enter temple, work in kitchen, wear flowers, have sex, touch other males or females, or come in contact. Menstruation is seen as a period of purification, and women are often separated from place of worship or any object pertaining to it, for the length of their period. This forms the basis of most of the cultural practices and restrictions around menstruation in Hinduism (Dunnavant 2012). whereas Buddhism doesn't have strict restriction and following practices. Women are allowed to enter Gumba they have permission to stay and worship, meditation, they can in and out according to their will. during interview 40 aged lama (priest of the Gumba) said,"

It is the pure time; mensuration is not considered as an impurity in us. women have no restriction to come and go they can do whatever they want however they don't want to enter inside Gumba as they think themselves impure, and it is the cause of cultural

influences. majority of women they have restriction and our community women also following same.

In most families and societies, religion have greater influence in either supporting or opposing any changes (Kothari 2010). It is important to understand attitudes of societies, mainly of elderly and senior members, especially in family oriented or close-knit societies. religion has highly influence decisions and various customs and rituals followed within families and societies at large. Women are the suppressed group in Nepali society their status is low rather than men in the society. About women status in society are written many literatures but some of them according to Hinduism among them are mentioned here. In general, in each society there are socio-cultural norms and prescriptions regarding the knowledge, attitude, preference, behavior of people, etc. Women aged 60 mentioned,

There are two Margis (ideas), shiva Margi (Hinduism) and Buddha Margi (Buddhism) Shiva Margi follow the restriction; they treat menstruation as an impurity whereas Buddha Margi has no restrictions. Buddhism takes it as a purity and women and girls are allowed to do any sort of auspicious activities. There are vast different between shiva Margi and Buddha Margi. They opposite treatment towards menstruation.

One nineteenth-century theory of physiology “reflex action” provided that “religions and cultural are far less stable due to peoples cyclicality – the cycle of menstruation and pregnancy” (Tuana 1993:98). Menstrual myths and taboos present women as polluters, incompetent and unlikeable beings with unstable psychological and emotional health. These perspectives establish that women need treatment, which might result in high social costs (Tuana 1993). These restricted practices are very popular among the educated women as well. However, menstruation practices are changed from generation-to-generation old generation understands as a god given process, whereas new generation takes as a natural bodily process which is like the statement of Ussher (1992).

women biological factor such as reproductive organs and menstruation (Beauvoir (1953:281) stated “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman”. Therefore, a person learns to be a woman through socialization, environment, and exposure to cultural beliefs. Tuana (1993) wrote “science is social institution influenced by the cultural, political and economic conditions under which it is practiced but this science is gendered, as Tuana proposed science is biased towards women. It is unfortunate to see that scientist like Charles Meigs (1885-1959) claim that education affects the ability of women to menstruate resulting in imbalance in reproduction. Meigs said that intellectual endeavors must be suspended during menstruation for women, but men should be encouraged to cultivate their brains. (Tuana 1993) who proposed that because nature interrupts women’s participation in their intellectual endeavors they can never be intellectually equal to men. Such scientific opinion support menstruation causes temporary mental instability if not total insanity in women. Both society and science try to prove that women are inferior beings. Therefore, it is not surprising that a young woman’s menarche is not

celebrated but hidden with a quick, furtive talk about the menstrual supplies (Bobel 2010). The need to hide menstruation provide a message to girls that their bodily functions should remain a secret and well hidden from everyone around them, resulting in constant and unnecessary stress on their psychology. A young woman mentioned,

"My mensuration was quite shocking; I was hidden immediately after knowing my mensuration because my brothers were at same school for my brothers, I left my school. My brothers went to school, but I didn't go for 7 days. After 7 days I went home and then went to school. I didn't go to school because I was scared to see my brother"

In contrast, in the same society a Buddhist nun mentioned,

"We don't have time to sit inside the room. We have to attend the Puja. Till now there is nothing like that. Ani has to do all the work here so may be that might be the reason and they can't take rest saying they had such problems. We don't have such rules." she said, women need rest and support during menstruation, but we don't, we have to work hard which make us physically and mentally uncomfortable, Women are also perceived to be morally inferior because of menstruation. Women are seen not only physically inferior but also morally inferior to men because of their inability (Tuana 1993).

In Buddhism (Theravada or Hinayana) menstruation is viewed as "a natural physical excretion that women have to go through on a monthly basis, nothing more or less". A monk of a Gumba,

All being are same. Period is natural process, and we should not discriminate making it big issue. It's given by nature to women. For example, if a flower boom, we cannot cut flower by because it blooms. Time comes and it blooms, and it plant la. For example, you and i are feeling cold. Winter fall in December and its nature law. During summer mosquitoes comes. So, we can't say why summer is here. There is no place for question. If you get problem with your body like headache, stomach pain and we can't ask that. They are sick so it happens, and they should think about treatment. If you had headache and you had problem, it's not fair to tell them don't touch here. Tamang community we do have Buddhist culture. They said before that we should visit temples during our period but at home, we don't have any discrimination. Even we are on our period we can offer incense to God, so we don't have that much of discrimination.

When I get married, they used to practice on those days. In Tamang or Mongolian caste we don't practice. They practice in Chhetri and Brahman Community. They would be happy to practice as they don't have to cook. Mensuration is like a flower like these plants. Now its season of Litchi and mango plant and they have flowers now and later they will have fruits. So, mensuration is like that. Without it we won't be able to have kids. If we can offer flower to God period should not be practiced as its natural process. In the past days because, they would practice because they had no water, cloths and people would be dirty so to avoid that they practiced. Now there are no such conditions. We take shower every day and now days they have pad where they don't have to use panties. We must take shower every day and we don't have that system of practicing. They won't worship God but rest then that they don't have to practice.

summary and conclusion

Women, they keep themselves far from religious and cultural activities during menstruation, they don't go to temple, they can't enter in the 'Pooja Room' of their own home and if they do mistake God ill punish them badly and they will have to suffer from various problems. The family fall in problematic situation. With this believe women keep themselves untouchable and they learn from their ancestor who must reselect they believe which is correspondence to the finding of Sharma (2010).

Impure body must avoid certain behaviors, restricted in their interaction with men, not allowed to touch religious texts or food or go into the kitchen, not allowed to visit holy places, and having to cover themselves fully, all makes women feel inferior because avoided things are considered as purity, The menstrual period often evokes negative feelings towards their bodies and bitterness about having to endure not only menstruation but the changes it makes in their lives. As a phenomenon happening only to girls, menstruation is correlated with female sexuality and its onset is defined by restrictions on behavior that instill a sense of shame in young women and negatively influence self-image. Perception the participants is that women's bodies produce dirty blood is manifest in taboos which entail menstruating women to refrain from performing domestic and ritual activities. Similar findings were reported (Garg, 1 b Sharma, and Sahay 2001) from India, Indonesia, Egypt, and Yugoslavia, where a considerable proportion of participants believed that it was inadvisable for menstruating women, because of their impure state, to visit female friends or relations or to visit temples and ritual places.

Among the dreadful understanding of mensuration, there is slightly different religious and cultural understanding about it and hope for the positive understanding with some young participant. I found mensuration practices are not stable but changing with a very relaxed

attitude. A participant reported that menstruation issues could not be discussed among male members of the society. They also stated that female takes menstruation issue as a matter of shame and underestimate the following the mainstream practices.

There are certain issues that society does not allow people to talk about openly because society considers it a taboo. As participants of the study "menstruation is experienced by all healthy women 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 that generates negativity and fear towards her gender and lowers self-esteem. Negative views of menstruation like to considering it as a misery and pain are common; therefore, their sources and implications deserve increased consideration. Menstruation practices which had huge restrictions in the past and present context however, it doesn't have solid form over time and generation, changing family pattern and inside and outside migration are playing role to make restricted practices flexible somehow. Women's position in society shows that women are considered measurable. Menstruation is women's very biological process that has very restricted treatment in the society. Menstruation blood is a symbol of impurity. de Beauvoir (1966) was concerned with the ways in which women in society were represented, she was also very aware of the material body which she regarded not as a static thing, but instead as a situation whose meanings were subject to change in reference to prevailing socio-cultural ideologies.

Hinduism where women are seen as religiously unclean because of their menstruation. Taking an opposite standpoint, one could say that women possess natural power. They are capable of nullifying sacred mantras long practiced by Hindu men and priests. Because of this, Brahmin priests had to keep women outside their sacred sanctuary. Men, with their superior position in society, must control women who possess the natural power and declare them unclean during the menstruation period. This practice and belief are carried into Thai custom unknowingly. Just to give an example, while fermenting rice, menstruating women are not allowed near the area, or the rice will be spoilt. They believe that menstruation holds secret power that can overcome magical spell. This is all Hindu belief and practice carried over into Thai culture and most Thais would think that prohibiting menstruating women is correct Buddhist practice but is far from it.

From a Buddhist point of view, menstruation is a natural physical excretion that women must go through monthly, nothing. During this time women tend to have weaker emotional balance. They would need religious support more than any other time. But in practice, ironically, they are kept out of the temple and branded as unclean. Religions are the battle for purity and impurity of menstruation .

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