

## Menstruation beyond biology: Analysing the menarche rituals in Tezpur town of Assam

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### ABSTRACT

*Menstruation is a biological process unique to women. The onset of menstruation marks the transition phase from childhood to adolescence particularly among girls and this transition is celebrated in Assam by attaching a symbolic meaning to it. This paper explores why do Assamese people attach a socio-cultural meaning despite it being a completely biological process and what importance it attach to in the lives of girls and their identity. The paper also delves into how Assamese people celebrate the onset of menstruation by conducting in-depth interviews with the respondents recruited through Purposive Sampling from the two wards of Tezpur town of Assam and discussing how the celebration of menarche rituals take place in contemporary times.*

**Keywords:** Assamese society, menstruation, menarche, patriarchy, tuloni biya,

### INTRODUCTION

The human body is not just made up of blood and flesh but it is more complex than that. The human body transcends biology as the society has associated different socio-cultural meaning to it as well as its basic functions. One such physiological process that occurs naturally in the body, especially in females throughout the adolescent stage of life is menstruation. Menstruation is the beginning of uterine bleeding signifying a probable beginning of sexual activity and reproduction. (Khanna et.al, 2005) The understanding of menstruation in India takes a symbolic form and plays a tremendous role in not just functioning of the female body but constructing the notion of 'womanhood'. Despite being a natural bodily process, menstruation in India is associated with a number of taboos and socio-cultural constraints that unnerve females, making their lives challenging and eventually making them dislike their own body and bodily process. The socio-cultural component of menstruation are the rituals that takes place when the girl first notices menstruation blood that marks her shift of identity from a girl to a woman. Menarche (the first occurrence of menstruation) in Assam is believed to be a social norm that distinguishes a woman's life status from one phase to another followed by changing social roles and expectations. India being a large country with a diverse culture, there are various Hindu rites of passages with varying cultural significance. (Das, 2018) The rituals are brought to life by performing the rites of passages. It cannot be denied that the conjunction of biology and culture constitutes the core of rituals, be it related to birth, marriage or death. The Assamese Hindu people of India celebrates menarche which is distinguished by both cultural and biological aspects of women' lives. Hindus from Assam have distinctive standards, traditions and rituals with a latent meaning which is why they are still prevalent to a certain extent. Analysing the rituals performed during menarche in the Assamese society from the reviewed literature is found to be relevant in the context of the

current study from the empirical findings which will reflect a picture of how women in Assam construct their identities. This paper aims to understand how menstruation is socially constructed and menarche rituals in Assam shapes the idea of womanhood. The current study, after analysing the available literature seeks to reflect the perception of people regarding menstruation and how they perceive womanhood in its light to fill up the adequate gap that has been identified in the body of literature rather than simply comprehending menstruation to be a biological phenomena with a socio-cultural underpinning.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The approach of the study is qualitative. The study took place in Tezpur town which is the administrative headquarter of Sonitpur district in Assam, also called as the Cultural Capital of Assam. The cultural traditions are implanted into the cultural tapestry of Tezpur making it a suitable ground to conduct the study. Tezpur, as per the Census 2011 is an urban agglomeration with a total population of 282,032. Currently, there are 19 wards under Tezpur Municipality and respondents from two of the wards, ward no 11 (Kolibari) and ward no 15 (Garwanpatty) were recruited for the study. Despite the town being multi-religious and multi-ethnic, the study only recruited Hindu women belonging to the age group 18 to 54 so that views of both menstruating women and women who reached menopause could be gathered. The women under the study represented the Other Backward Castes and the Brahmins. Purposive sampling was employed for recruiting respondents for the study. Both primary data and secondary data has been collected to prepare this paper. To collect primary data, in-depth interviews has been conducted with fifteen respondents out of which ten were college going girls and five were home-makers. Oral narratives were taken into account to know about the rituals and ceremonial songs pertaining to menarche. The tools employed to collect data includes observation and unstructured interview guide. Secondary data has been accumulated from published journals.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

Without mentioning the aspect of gender, it is impossible to understand menstruation and analyse menarche rituals in the truest sense of the term as gender defines these rituals. The cultural connotation of gender emerging during the rituals comprehends how performance of rituals leads to internalising the meanings of gender differences in the society as people live gendered lives. It is noteworthy to mention that menstruation rituals are gendered rituals that signal the shifting of social as well as cultural position of women in the society playing a significant role in both an individual's life and in society as a whole (Das, 2022) Right from a very young age, girls are socialised to develop an understanding of their transient participation in their natal home. (Dube, 1988) One of the key ways that a girl learns about the inevitable transition from their natal home to husband's home is through the rituals performed during menarche along with making her learn how the society expects her to behave post menarche.

### **Celebration of menarche in Assam**

In Assam, menarche begins with a rite called '*Tuloni Biya*' which is conducted to mark a girl's achievement of feminine status. The term '*Tuloni*' means 'to take up or to lift up' meaning that a girl has been taken up to a higher social position and the term '*Biya*' means 'marriage or wedding'. The other term for '*Tuloni Biya*' in Assam is '*Shanti Biya*' where '*Shanti*' denotes a sigh of relief of her parents that their daughter is menstruating, indicating her capability to start her conjugal life and reproduce. (Das, 2014) '*Tuloni Biya*' involves a symbolic rite that is almost identical to a wedding. Assamese people celebrate this ritual with an inherent notion of purity and pollution and in the light of this notion, the idea of 'womanhood' is manifested.

#### *Rituals performed in Tuloni Biya*

When a girl first notices her menstrual blood, she is confined to a room for seven days with no sight of the outer world. She is then dressed in a new pair of '*Mekhela Sador*'. (a type of traditional Assamese clothing) The family of the girl calls for a priest and the mother informs the priest about the date and on what time she started to menstruate. Performing some astronomical calculations the priest predicts her future, the course of her marital life as well as her personality. She is associated with certain qualities as per the timing of her menstruation. The priest would offer the requisite solutions for the girl to deal with the obstacles she will face based on prediction and minimise them so that the girl could have a better conjugal life. (Das, 2014) During those seven days, the girl is not allowed to eat whatever she takes on a daily basis but she is fed fruits, nuts and other boiled food to replenish the blood lost during menstruation and to regulate the blood flow, strengthening the reproductive organs and increasing a woman's fertility facilitating childbearing. (Dube, 1988) Another important dietary regulation that Assamese women needs to follow is fasting and the justification behind this is to enjoy a better conjugal life. This time period of fasting varies from girl to girl, be it a week, month or even a year, depending upon the type of obstacles the priest predicts for them. (Das, 2014) Celebration of menarche and unique dietary restrictions in Assam appear to be ways of expressing the significance of motherhood and it evidently denotes a regulation of sexuality. The fourth and the seventh day of menarche ritual is of utmost importance in the Assamese community. On the fourth day, the girl is supposed to take a bath of gram paste and turmeric (*maah-halodhi*). In the location of the bath, a young banana tree and an elephant ear plant is planted that is believed to be her husband and son. She needs to spread gram paste and turmeric on her fictitious husband, that is, the banana tree. Right after the ritual bath, the girl bows and prays in front of the banana tree, which represents her husband, and the smaller plant, which represents a son. This is not merely a ritual but it has a symbolic meaning that she wishes for a husband and a son in future. (Patar, 2019) It has been observed in many households that, on the seventh day, the girl is dressed up as a bride and the family of the girl arranges a feast for the family, friends and neighbours. This is done to celebrate the girl's new found social identity. This celebration is exactly like a wedding but without the presence of the groom. Symbolically, an Assamese girl is given the identity of a '*gabhoru*' (an Assamese term to refer to young and unmarried woman) meaning that the girl is now graced with certain physical characteristics that completes her as a woman. (Das, 2014)

### **Construction of womanhood on reaching menarche**

The onset of menarche is one of the most vulnerable time in the lives of girls as she needs to undergo several restrictions imposed by the society and every woman is bound to adhere to them in their post-menarche phase. The society associates certain activities to be feminine and women not adhering to those activities are considered unfit of being a woman. The respondents of the study pointed out to this expectation when they shared that their families try to shape them in a certain way against their wish which is acceptable by the society.

One respondent states – ‘*When my tuloni biya ritual was going on, an old lady whispered that now I have grown up and I should be careful in everything.*’

This brings to us the famous quote of Simone de Beauvoir, ‘One is not born but rather becomes a woman.’ An individual identifies as a woman when the traits, roles and behaviour stereotypical to women is performed by the individual. This means that gender identity is gradually acquired by an individual in the society. Another renowned feminist, Judith Butler contended that gender is not natural rather it is made in the society and is performative. This claim of Butler seems to fit in the Assamese society because women are constantly reminded that certain behaviour will make them a woman and they are expected to stick to their gender roles that will identify them as ‘woman’. Throughout menstruation, disobedience to the restrictions and rituals are subtly dealt by instilling a terror of illness and an unhappy marriage. This shows that the only destiny of women is marriage and right from a very young age, they are expected to put efforts to make their married life better. From the accounts of the respondents it has been interpreted that socialisation is another important aspect that needs to be considered in this regard. The family is considered to be the main agent of socialisation and the advices that the family gives to their daughters about meeting the gender specific societal expectations leads to internalization of feminine identity. In this context, Parsons’ socialization theory could be referred to where he emphasized the role of socialisation in order to maintain the social order by ensuring that the individuals conform to the roles that society has established. It is through a constant social interaction that individuals develop a sense of identity. (Parsons, 1959) From the description of the rituals performed during the ceremony, it is interesting to note that majority of the people taking part in the menarche rituals are women and they perform each and every prescribed ritual no matter how regressive it is for the womenfolk. This clearly reflects that patriarchy is deeply ingrained into the psyche of people and it is the women themselves who are the main perpetrators of patriarchy in the society. The idea of patriarchy being perpetuated by women is evident in the ceremonial songs (*Biya Naam*) sung during ‘Tuloni Biya’.

*Ajir pora tumi nohoba obuj*

(From now on be understanding)

*Xabodhane diba protti tu khuj*

(Be careful in every step you take)

*Xun dhon herale eku neherai*

(Losing gold and wealth won't let you lose anything)

*Maan xonman herale xokolu herai*

(But losing your dignity will let you lose everything)

*Baalyo kaal jibon tu nupua ghurai*

(You will not get back your childhood)

*Ajir pora hola xojaare sorai*

(From now on you have become a caged bird)

*Xojaar sorair logot tulona kori*

(By comparing you to a caged bird)

*Ajir pora hoba amar logori*

(From now on you are our friend)

An analysis of the biya naam from tuloni biya which has been collected from a woman recruited for the study reveals a deeply ingrained patriarchal system in Assamese society. The biya naam in a very subtle way urges the menstruating girl to adhere to the patriarchal norms and fulfill the expectations of the society by complying to the notions of womanhood as designed by the patriarchal society. (Patar, 2019) It has been observed that a girl often gets perplexed at the image of her 'new self' when she is constantly reminded that she is always 'prepared' for someone else – men, for marriage. (Dube, 1988) The efforts made by her family to design her nature in such a way that she is acceptable by the society as an 'ideal woman' might alienate her from her own self. Majority of the respondents who have been interviewed for the study had no idea about their newly found identity and they admitted being embarrassed and scared when they reached menarche. Prior to reaching their menstruation, most of them had no idea about the process and even after years of them experiencing menstruation, they did not receive proper education on it. Any discussion on menstruation with elders would end up in making the young girls understand the significance of following restrictions and rituals rather than explaining the significance of menstrual health and reproductive health. The elder women recruited for the study clearly indicated how marriage is an important event in the life of a woman and it is this ideology that hitting puberty is celebrated widely in Assam.

### **Problematic terms to refer to menstruation in Assam**

Taboos and restrictions latently designate women as pollutants and subjugate them. (Kaundal and Thakur, 2014). Since menstrual blood is believed to be dirty, in Assam, menstruation is termed as 'suwa', meaning polluted. The actual Assamese word for menstruation is 'Ritushrow' but this term is not a popular term and people rarely use it. (Das, 2008; Dutta, 2021) The respondents of this study mentioned that the days when they menstruate, some refer to it as 'suwa' (state of being polluted), 'nuwara' (state of not being able to), 'okhubidha' (state of being in a discomfort), 'mahekia' (a monthly phenomenon) and some term it as

'periods'. The frequent and widespread use of such terms convince people to believe that menstruation is supposed to be viewed as impure. Menstruation is not an alien concept to men and they are well aware of the menstruation terminologies but women behave submissive about it without realising the fact that by doing so they are separating themselves from their own body and bodily processes. (Jackson and Falmagne, 2013) The origin of menstruation taboos can be traced back to the Vedic times and is frequently connected to Indra's killing of Vritra who is portrayed in the Rigveda as the keeper of waters. When Indra killed Vritra who was a brahmin, Indra got endowed with 'Brahmahatya Dosha' and to get rid of it he gave it to the women, land and rivers. (Chawla, 1994) Such tales gives the idea that menstruation is unnatural and polluting. The Assamese society observe many restrictions when the women of the families menstruate, considering menstruation to be a taboo. The menstruating women are expected to preferably stay on her bed in a particular room for three days. She is not allowed to prepare her own meals as a menstruating woman is strictly prohibited to enter the kitchen because Assamese people believe that Goddess Lakshmi resides in the kitchen. In Assamese households, generally during the fourth day, the woman is allowed to resume her daily routine after taking a bath and a head wash. This bath is believed to diminish her impurity. However, among all these taboos, not visiting religious places during menstruation is the most strictly followed taboo and whether or not visiting temples and worshipping deities during periods is a long-time debatable matter among the Assamese people and in fact, in entire India. Menstruation taboos regulates the sexuality of women and they are forced to experience the feeling of guilt about a biological process which is natural and normal. (Jalan et.al, 2020)

### **Menstruation is both sacred and polluting : The irony**

In the month of June, Assam witness the event of '*Ambubachi Mela*' also known as '*Xaat*' which is a religious Hindu festival held annually at Kamakhya temple in Guwahati to celebrate the yearly menstrual course of Goddess Kamakhya. It is an irony how Assam considers menstruation to be filthy when a woman goes through it every month but at the same time worship the menstruation of Goddess Kamakhya believing it to be extremely sacred. This irony is heightened when during '*Ambubachi Mela*', a dual notion of purity and pollution is attached to menstruation. Where on one hand, people visit the Kamakhya temple to collect the menstrual fabric and fluid because of its sacredness, on the other hand, women menstruating during '*Ambubachi Mela*' needs to follow severe restrictions.

A respondent shared - '*I usually do not follow restrictions when I am on my periods but I follow strict restrictions if I get menstruation during Ambubachi Mela.*'

When enquired about the restrictions that she follows when she gets her periods during Ambubachi Mela, she replied that it is similar to the restrictions that a girl follows during menarche rituals. Menstruation related taboos affect the quality of life of a woman.

### **Impact of menstruation myths on women**

Menstruation being a completely biological process, there exist no connection to purity and impurity but association of menstruation to myths and taboos made people perceive it as something transcendental. Inadequate knowledge about menstruation and reproductive health makes it even more difficult for women to challenge the cultural taboos and prejudices. The study has found that while discussing about menstruation in Assamese households, importance of following rituals for a happy conjugal life is paid much attention than educating young girls about periods and menstrual health. It is disheartening to see how the society is entangling young women in myths and customs suggesting them to maintain their polluted bodies rather than making them understand the advantages of practicing menstrual hygiene and break stereotypes and outdated traditions. The young women needs to fight against these taboos rather than helplessly being constrained by it because menstruation is nothing more than biology. (Kumar and Srivastava, 2011)

### **Changing Scenario of celebrating Menarche in Tezpur**

From the literature reviewed, it has been found that menstruation ceremony in Assam has two extremes . The first extreme is that menarche in some families is privately observed with only performing the necessary rituals with no arrangement of grand feast. The reason for this could be manifold – lack of time amidst busy everyday work schedule, feeling of insecurity about admitting about the girl’s new found sexual identity because it is unsafe for girls with changing times, growing emergence of nuclear families and gradual loss of recollection of the rites with the death of the older generations. (Das, 2017) The family of only three respondents of the study mentioned about a private menstruation ceremony as the girls had to attend school and missing classes for a week was not appreciated by them. Lack of elderly people who were well versed with the rituals was also a factor as mentioned by them. Another extreme that was found from the interviews was that some families celebrated their daughter’s puberty in grandeur by arranging huge feast. One of the respondent expressed her excitement of getting dolled up as a bride on the seventh day and she was rejoicing when she received a lot of gifts from the guests who were invited. However, it is to be noted that this extravagant celebration is not a part of the rituals but rather it is a manifestation of a high socio-economic standing of the girl’s family. Such celebration are of recent happenings as it was not witnessed in the previous times. It cannot be denied that menstruation rituals and taboos are slowly disappearing in the current time. Some of the respondents have mentioned that their families observed menarche rituals only for four days and they were allowed to resume their regular life after the purificatory bath on the fourth day. Even in the subsequent monthly cycles, respondents have mentioned that they were not imposed with restrictions but they have to wash the things they have used like utensils, clothes during the first three days of their menstrual cycle. But women of some families in the study still follow the norm of three days isolation for the sake of the elderly in their home who consider menstruation as a taboo and does not appreciate if a menstruating woman is in close proximity to them. It is well reflected in the previously conducted studies as well as from the findings of the current study that although the Assamese tradition of

celebrating 'Tuloni Biya' and following strict restrictions during monthly cycle is gradually moving towards the path of decline yet it does not signify the waning of the taboo surrounding menstruation.

### **Conclusion**

It may be concluded that menstruation is not just a biological process but it is more than that. This natural process is given a socio-cultural meaning that the society perceive beyond biology. This socio-cultural meaning is visible when rituals are performed as soon as a girl first menstruates or reach menarche. When the onset of menstruation gains a ritualistic underpinning it becomes associated with the structuring as well as functioning of the society. Rituals conducted during menarche is the threshold of her identifying as a 'woman' making a drastic transformation in her life. The construction of identity on the basis of one's gender by enacting the gender specific roles and expectations is what the menarche rituals subtly portray which is further internalised owing to gendered socialisation. Data collected from both primary and secondary sources of the study demonstrates unequivocally how the ideology of patriarchy is embedded in the society that has been passed down from one generation to another. It is noteworthy to observe that although women are at the receiving end of the terror of patriarchy yet they are the ones taking active part in the menarche rituals despite the regressive latent expression of those rituals which is still evident from the accounts of the respondents who recalled how they were made to adhere to cultural norms that has been existing since the past generations and rather than educating them about menstrual hygiene, elders pay attention to following the associated norms of menstruation. Myths and taboos associated with menstruation further alienate the society from its biological naturalness and coil it in the idea of menstruation as something which is impure and polluted. However, it has been found in the study that following the norm of staying isolated for three days during the monthly menstrual cycle has been fading due to educational and other work commitments. But a few women maintained that they follow the norm for the sake of the elderly at their house in order to not hurt their sentiment. On another note, menstrual taboos are waning partially with the passage of time yet the belief that it is impure and menstruating women are the pollutants appears to remain intact in the society because it is nearly impossible to break taboos that have been ubiquitous in the society since time immemorial.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The author declare no conflict of interest.

### **Funding Information**

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

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