



## Social Dimension of Menstruation: A Study of Nepali Females

Taniya Khangembam  
MA Sociology, Gauhati University

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**Abstract** – The study indicates the menstrual hygiene practices and attitudes of Nepali females living in Rajabari village in Guwahati. Twenty individuals, ages 11 to 40, participated in unstructured interviews that were done using a qualitative methodology. Thematic analysis was used to examine the primary data utilizing secondary sources as a supplement. The main conclusions show that cultural and religious views, financial limitations, and a lack of awareness program all influence people's perceptions and practices differently. The report draws attention to several important issues, such as menstruation-related restrictions on activities, a lack of water, restricted access to sanitary pads, and stigma associated with menstruation. These results highlight the need for focused awareness campaigns and enhanced facilities for menstrual hygiene in order to address the structural problems and cultural taboos that the women of Rajabari village face.

**Keywords** – Menstruation, Menstrual Hygiene, Nepali, Stigma, Taboo

### I. Introduction

‘...the issue becomes not whether a person has experience with a stigma of his own, because he has, but rather how many varieties he has had his own experience with.’ — Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*

Menstrual stigma is a widespread concept that affects girls and women physically, financially, and emotionally. Menstruation frequently poses social and health challenges for young women. In countries such as India, where menstruation is stigmatized, it can be difficult to a large extent. Many women lack resources for safely managing menstruation at home and in school, such as private bathrooms with clean water. Also, menstruation is associated with taboos and cultural beliefs or religious practices in many parts of India. Menstruation is a natural biological process that holds significant cultural, social and, health implications for women worldwide. In a country like India which has rich traditions and beliefs, menstruation is deeply intertwined with cultural and

religious practices, often influencing women's perception, knowledge, and overall well-being. This research focuses on Nepali females residing in Rajabari village in the areas of women's perception, cultural and religious beliefs associated with this phenomenon. Furthermore, this study seeks to put light on structural issues that impede access to menstrual hygiene-related products in the village.

Hygienic menstrual practices include the use of sanitary pads during menstrual flows. However, most women and adolescent girls are unable to have access to these essential products that will help maintain their menstrual health either because they are too expensive or they are unavailable. This paper examines on menstrual hygiene practices among Nepali women living in the Rajabari Village of Kamrup, Guwahati, Assam.

### II. Statement of Problem

Menstruation is a universal experience among females. However, managing menstrual hygiene presents serious hurdles for women in many rural areas, such as Rajabari village in Guwahati. Cultural taboos, religious prohibitions, and structural problems like inadequate access to sanitary pads and water only serve to increase these difficulties. What makes the issue worse is due to lack of knowledge and instruction regarding menstrual hygiene. Nepali women in Rajabari village face a variety of obstacles during their menstrual cycle that includes practical problems like the lack of sanitary pads and water to restricting cultural norms. These challenges make it difficult for the females to keep up good hygiene and take part completely in everyday activities like socializing and education.

### III. Study Area

Rajabari village is located at Panikhaiti Gaon, Guwahati, Assam, 781004. It lies under Kamrup district of Guwahati. The population of the village head is estimated to be 690 with 83 households (Census Digital Library, 2011). The population comprises of Assamese, Bengali and Nepali. This study is conducted among the Nepali females.



#### IV. Objectives of the Study

- To know the perception and information of menstruation and menstrual hygiene practices among the Nepali females of the village.
- To identify the levels of cultural/religious beliefs (taboos) associated with menstruation among the Nepali females of Rajabari village.
- To explore the structural issues of menstrual hygiene practices and its associated unhealthy experiences.

#### V. Ethical Consideration

The study received approval from each and every respondent who had involved in giving interviews. A full-fledged consent was taken from every female respondent to record their statements. The purpose of the study was also explained before interview was conducted. Parental consent was taken when minors below 18 years of age were interviewed. Also, consent was taken before taking photographs from the field work.

#### VI. Limitations of the Study

This study was intended to generate information about potential areas for intervention. However, findings should not be considered representative or generalist to females across India, though many of the findings are consistent with other research. Purposive sampling was used to conduct the study. This might lead to selection bias and participation of the only particular females cannot be used for universal information. Getting a sample from a rural woman to speak about menstrual stigma and hygiene was a difficult to access. Some of them were not willing to participate after being approached by the researcher.

#### VII. Research Methodology

##### i) Qualitative approach:

Qualitative approach is used to conduct the research with a sample size of 20 Nepali females of Rajabari village. The study is considered to be sensitive in nature which talks about menstrual hygiene and stigma faced by females. Hence, the approach is less rigid and allows flexibility to the respondents.

ii) Data Collection: The data includes both primary and secondary data. Primary data are obtained from the respondents while secondary data are gathered from existing literature of the similar study such as academic journals and books.

The study was carried out with the help of unstructured interview based on menstrual stigma and menstrual hygiene. However the topic of the interview is based on general perception on

menstruation by the women, about menstrual hygiene practices followed by them and restrictive activities or challenges during menstruation.

The method applied for collecting the primary data is unstructured interview where the data is recorded through voice recording. The respondents' medium of answering was English, Assamese and Nepali.

iii) Sample Selection: Non - Probability Sampling Method (individuals are selected based on non-random criteria) is used while collecting information from the respondents. Purposive non-probability method is used by selecting a certain group of people from the entire village that is Nepali females who are experiencing menstrual cycle.

Consent was obtained for young women who are 18+ and parental consent was obtained for participants younger than 18 years of age.

iv) Data analysis: The study uses thematic analysis to methodically examine the qualitative information gathered from 20 Nepali women in Rajabari village who participated in unstructured interviews. A technique for finding, examining, and summarizing patterns (themes) in data is called thematic analysis. This method aids in giving a thorough and insightful explanation of the facts.

#### VIII. Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded with voice recorders and transcribed. Transcripts were translated into English in case of Nepali and Assamese languages. Data were coded and reviewed all the transcripts to generate a code book and themes. Thematic analysis is used for this research.

In order to better illustrate the overarching constructs and themes and the relationships between them, the topics and subtopics are divided within various themes on the basis of interviews. It can be seen as follows -

A. Category 1: Bio data of the respondents. The sub topic under this category includes age, religion and educational qualification.

B. Category 2: General information of menstruation and menstrual hygiene practices. The sub topic of this category includes onset of menarche, average duration of menstruation and level of maintenance of hygiene during menstruation.

C. Category 3: Perception and information of menstruation among the females. The sub topics includes preferential perception over 'clothes vs pads', 'embarrassment vs normalizing' over menstrual phenomena, unaware of menstrual hygiene practices and menstrual stigma.

D. Category 4: Levels of religious/cultural practices (taboos) during menstruation. The two levels include the views of the supporters and the views of



the non-supporters of religious and cultural practices during menstrual period.

E. Category 5: Structural issues on menstrual hygiene practices. The sub topics are conditions on availability of water, sanitary pads, reason for using clothes instead of pads, proper washroom, and average distance of going to buy sanitary pads, number of pharmacies or shops located in the area which sells sanitary pads, disposal area of the used pads and its associated unhealthy experiences.

### IX. Results

A. Category 1: Bio data of the respondents-

A total of 20 unstructured interviews were performed. The bio data of the respondents can be seen under the tables-

Table 1: Age Distribution  
 Source: Primary data

Age Group (in years)	Frequency
11-20	3
20-30	11
30-40	6
Total	20

The table shows that the age group 20-30 years of the respondents are the maximum respondent followed by the age group 30-40 years and lastly, 11-20 age group holds three number of respondents.

Table 2: Religion  
 Source: Primary data

Religion	Frequency
Hindu	20

The table shows that all the respondents belong to Hindu religion.

Table 3: Educational Qualification  
 Source: Primary data

Educational Qualification	Frequency
Upper Primary	3
Matriculation	7
Higher Secondary	5
Graduate	5
Total	20

The above table shows that the three respondents have passed upper primary, seven of them had completed matriculation, five of them had completed higher secondary level and another five of them have passed graduation.

B. Category 2: General information of menstruation and menstrual hygiene practices of the respondents-

i) Onset of menarche - Respondents have started experiencing menstruation in different ages. A few

of them began when they were 12 or 13 years old. Thirteen was the age at which the majority of respondents experienced their first menstruation.

‘My first period came when I was 13 years old. I was shocked to see blood stain for the first time in my inner wear and felt shy to tell to my mother’ - A 21 year old lady.

ii) Average duration of menstruation- Not all respondents have similar duration of menstrual cycle. Some of them have period for 3 days, others with 4 days and 5 days. While some of them have experienced irregular menstrual period and missed period sometimes.

‘The duration of my cycle is 3 days and I wait patiently every month to end the 3 days soon because I have severe period pain’ - A 19 year old female.

iii) Level of maintenance of hygiene during menstruation-When asked about cleaning of genital area while having menstruation, almost every respondents gave the answer positively. But there has been an issue on water availability of cleaning sometimes. Also, some of them have the belief that taking bath will make the blood freezes and it will make them pain. Therefore, they avoid taking bath for the first two days.

‘My mother has told me every-time not to take bath on the first two days while having menstruation because the blood will flow slowly when I feel cold. So I avoid taking bath on the first two days of menstruation.’ - A 15 year old girl.

C. Category 3: Perception and information of menstruation of the females-

i) Clothes vs Pads - Some respondents prefer clothes as absorbents while some prefer pads. The clothes users have perceived that they can wash it and use it more than once unlike the pads and it will save money. The pads users talked about hygienic use and it makes them more comfortable to use and don't have tensions for leakages. Also, this perception of preference depends on financial condition. They buy pads when they have money and keep clothes for second option.

‘There were times I had to use clothes instead of pads because I had no option with financial instability. I let my daughters use the pads while I had used clothes because I was used to it since before. But sanitary pad is better than clothes absorbent’ - A 38 year old lady.

ii) Embarrassment vs Normalizing - All the youths have viewed menstruation as a very normal situation. They talked about menstruation with their friends and share each other. While women at the average age of 30-40 years have felt that it is a very personal matter. They use code language to identify



whether a female is in menstruation or not. They hardly say period in an open way. It was advised to young women not to talk about their periods with specific people. It was instructed to many participants that they were not to discuss menstruation with boys or men in general, not even with members of their own family.

‘About menstruation, we never talk in front of male elders in our family. We know it by code language or body language when it is necessary’ - A 36 year old female. Then I asked - Which code language? She replied ‘it is the one’ and smiled at me.

iii) Not aware on menstrual hygiene practices- When asked about any menstrual related awareness program being held in the village or not, all the respondents have answered negatively. There is lack of awareness of menstrual hygiene related information in the village. This has influenced their perception on menstruation as something which does not talk publicly. Further, they added that they will welcome if any organization is willing to take part in giving awareness program to the village.

‘I have never experienced anyone who came to our village and talk about menstruation. I will be happy if someone come and give us knowledge for it’ - A 27 year old lady

iv) Menstrual Stigma - The majority of young women received messages from female relatives stating menstruation was dirty and impure and perceived it as something dirty. Very few young women participated in worship activities during menstruation. While some did not know the reason why, most reported that they were not allowed to pray or perform puja because they were dirty, unclean, or impure.

‘My mother told me that during periods you are not clean and you cannot offer prayer and cannot sit in the area where prayers are offered.’ - A 16 years old girl

D. Category 4: Religious/Cultural practices (taboos) during menstruation-

i) Views of supporters of the religious /cultural practices - Some women are of the opinion that there are religious/cultural practices associated with menstruation in their families. They also want to maintain these practices such as refraining from entering into kitchen, cannot touch men, cannot perform religious activities or enter into temples. Further talking into these practices, the women who support the practices believe that those are their traditions which are passed on to generation and this needs to be respected.

‘I prefer not to cook food for male elders and my husband during menstruation because it will bring them bad luck. This is something passed on to

generation as impurity and everyone believes the taboo’ - A 37 year old lady

ii) Views of non-supporters of the religious/cultural practices- A few respondents who are under 27 years of age have the opinion that there is no need to follow the age old traditions regarding the restrictions while having period. They believe that women should be allowed to enter into kitchen or allow them to perform all the normal activities even if they are in menstruation. Females of this group also have the view of eliminating the age old traditions of restrictions existing in the village such as not allowing them to cook food or enter into kitchen.

‘People must realize that menstruation is just a biological process and not something relates to impurity. There is no need for having restriction in normal activities. Also, we have to spread awareness about it’ - A 20 year old female

E. Category 5: Structural issues regarding menstrual hygiene practices-

i) Conditions on water unavailability- The village has one pond, one well and one hand pump which are considered to be the major sources of water. However, there are times where there is lack in availability of water. This had negatively impacted in the hygiene maintenance while having menstruation.

‘Life during unavailability of water is very hard. We had to use it very judiciously and can’t use it up-to the extent I want during menstruation. I had to keep the used clothes absorbents a few days to wait for water’ - A 22 years old female

ii) Conditions on access to sanitary pads- In order to buy sanitary pads, they have two options either at one village pharmacy and one shop located in the village. Sometimes there is unavailability of sanitary pads in the village when the two sources had finished their sales. Also, they buy sanitary pads when they have the ability to finance it.

‘We get sanitary pads from a pharmacy and a shop. They both are at walking distance so it is good for us. However, there are times where the shop and pharmacy had closed or sales got over’ - A 15 years old girl

iii) Condition of washrooms- All the respondents have the opinion that they have proper washrooms and do not face any problems while having menstruation except the water unavailability problem for few days in a year. A school going girl mentioned about the uncomfortable feeling in washroom at her school located in the village itself because the school has no separate toilet facilities for different genders.



'I do not face any problem regarding washroom in home but I am uncomfortable at school because our school does not have separate toilets for girls and boys' - A 13 years old girl

iv) Disposal area of the used pads - The respondents spoke that they had disposed off the pads either by burning or by throwing away. They also have the opinion that if pads are thrown openly then someone can do black magic by using the blood and make them unhealthy. Therefore, they prefer throwing it privately in dustbin or burning it completely.

'My mother told me not to throw pads openly because someone can use the blood for black magic and it can make me unhealthy or mentally mad. So I never throw away in open field' - A 15 years old girl

v) Menstrual unhygienic and its associated unhealthy life experiences –

While many of the respondents do not have the problem of diseases associated with unhygienic, a girl (16 years old) had Urinary Tract Infections (UTIs) before. She had suffered for many days in hospital in order to get better. Also, some women are having irregular menstrual cycle.

'I had my worst experience due to UTIs. Doctors told me to care for future also because it can be life threatening' - A 16 years old girl

vi) Reasons for choosing clothes instead of pads - Some villagers prefer to choose clothes absorbents instead of pads for reasons such as reusable, cheaper and easily available.

'Clothes are the best option for everyone who can't buy pads. I use clothes as absorbents. I can clean it by washing and drying in sunlight. This is also a hygienic option' - A 29 years old woman

## X. Discussion

This study has given a number of themes relating to menstruation. The young girls and women interviewed reported that they face numerous barriers to safe and healthy menstruation consistent with multiple levels. At the individual level, some women and girls do not maintain hygiene up-to their expectations because of lack of water in the village. On a social level, menstruation was stigmatized. They could only discuss menstruation with select individuals and found their regular mobility curtailed during menstruation. On an institutional level such as religion, culture and family, the females experienced menstruation-related shame and embarrassment, do not have the liberty to worship or enter kitchen in their families even though a few of them have relaxation on it. Stigma and taboo around menstruation is also prominently found in the study. Structural difficulties such as financial issues to buy pads,

availability of water, inadequate bathroom facilities and stigmas on disposal of pads have also been identified in the study. It has also been found in the study that some of the females still use clothes absorbents instead of pads, suffer from unhygienic condition and take irregular period as normal. Complete lack of awareness program relating to menstrual hygiene is found in the village.

Numerous results from various parts of India agree with similar conclusions. In India, there is also a lot of stigma and taboo around menstruation; numerous studies have documented negative signals related to menstruation. Research has also found that there are limited opportunities for young women to discuss menstruation openly and that regular activities and mobility are limited during menstruation. Overall, menstruating young women face similar challenges in many regions and settings in India. Structural problems and cultural related problems are widely found in various similar studies related to menstruation. Menstrual hygiene related awareness has become a very important step to be taken up in various parts of India because many of the other studies also see the lack of menstrual health awareness.

## XI. Conclusion

The study suggests that menstruation-related issues are complex and influenced by a variety of factors, including cultural and religious beliefs, structural challenges and individual experiences and perceptions. The research highlights that menstruation poses challenges for young women as it is stigmatized. It also reveals that menstruation is deeply intertwined with cultural and religious practices, influencing women's perception, knowledge, and overall well-being. Lack of resources for managing menstruation, such as clean water and sanitary pads, and the influence of taboos and cultural beliefs are the challenges which are experienced by the Nepali females of Rajabari village. The analysis highlights the need for more education and awareness programs to combat stigma and promote proper menstrual hygiene practices. Menstruation also impacts on women's lifestyle which prohibits from participating normal activities. It is still considered as a shameful thing to speak openly.

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Annexure –

A. Toilet condition of the school in village

Source – Primary Data





B. Clothes line in the village for drying clothes (including menstrual absorbent clothes)  
Source – Primary Data



C. Pharmacy located in the village which sells sanitary pads  
Source – Primary Data

