

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL BELIEFS ASSOCIATED WITH MENARCHE: A CASE STUDY AMONG THE AHOM

Urbashi Gogoi¹ and S. Sengupta²

¹Former Student, Department of Anthropology, Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh, Assam, 786004

²Former Professor, Department of Anthropology, Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh, Assam, 786004.

E-mail: sarthak@dibru.ac.in

Article History

Received : 26 March 2022

Revised : 20 April 2022

Accepted : 30 April 2022

Published : 22 June 2022

Abstract: This study was conducted to appraise the socio-cultural beliefs and practices related to menstruation among the Ahom girls of upper Assam. It was carried out in three remote Ahom-dominated villages of the Dibrugarh District. A pretested structured questionnaire was used to collect information after obtaining informed consent from the participants and families. The present data have also been compared with other available data.

Keywords

Menstruation, knowledge, belief, practice, Ahom, Assam

Introduction

In India, menstruation and its associated practices followed by women during menarche have always been multifaceted and sensitive issues. It is one of the major challenges before every pubescent girl is to handle menstruation (Therese and Maria, 2010), although it is a normal body function in females. Menstruation integrates countless myths and mysteries. Among the diverse societies of India, several social taboos and cultural confines exist even today concerning menstruation which makes their life difficult and binds them to all the sufferings they faced or will be facing. These beliefs and customs are brought up and followed by them throughout their lives and then these were passed on to the next

To cite this article

U. Gogoi & S. Sengupta. (2022). Social and Cultural Beliefs Associated with Menarche: A Case Study among the Ahom. *Man, Environment and Society*, Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 99-106. <https://DOI: 10.47509/MES.2022.v03i01.07>

generation. Menarche is celebrated in many cultures around the world as a rite of passage, a time to recognize that a girl is moving into womanhood. In some parts of our country, when a girl has menarche, parents invite close friends and relatives to celebrate the occasion; however, in Indian society menstruation is still regarded as somewhat impure and polluted. Even though it is a natural process, it is linked with several fallacies and practices which occasionally result in unpleasant health outcomes. Increased knowledge about menstruation right from childhood may escalate safe practices. Cultural and religious beliefs regarding menstruation play an oppressive role in a female's life. Therefore, in this paper, an attempt has been made to study the existing social and cultural practices associated with menarche among the Ahom females, their awareness level, their perception about menstruation, how do they take care of it, the diverse taboos, norms, and cultural practices linked with menstruation.

Material and method: The Ahom, a Shan or Thai group of people of North Myanmar entered Assam in the third decade of the 13th century (1228 AD), in course of time fully assimilated and ruled Assam for nearly six hundred years. They have their language, script, literature, culture, religion, and chronicle (*Buranji*). The language was spoken by a small group of Tai-Ahom people in a region which at present comprises of Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, and Charaideo districts, and the population is mostly found in the districts of Golaghat, Jorhat, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, and in some parts of Lakhimpur, Sonitpur, and Dhemaji districts of Assam.

For the present study the materials were collected from three Ahom populated villages namely; Gohain *gaon*, Nahaza Konwar *gaon*, and Burahaza Konwar *gaon* in the Dibrugarh district. Dibrugarh is a major urbanized district of upper Assam located at 27°29'N 95°00'E / 27.48°N 95°E, covering an area of about 2300 square km. The investigation was undertaken between March and April 2019. The participants have explained the purpose of the study and their consent obtained. The adolescent and unmarried adult Ahom women (n = 152) aged 11 years to 40 years who have attained menarche are considered for the present study.

Results

Beliefs and practices associated with menarche among the Ahom women: Like several other societies, the females of the Ahom population also follow certain cultural and social beliefs and practices that are being passed from generation to generation. The adolescent girls and their mothers in the present study reported various social, and cultural practices and taboos that are associated with menstruation. The monthly shedding of menstrual blood is considered to be impure; during those days the girls were bound to follow certain rules and regulations. However, with the changing years, because of awareness, and altering perception regarding menstruation, the practices that are strictly being followed during

the earliest days were to some extent relaxed. But not all the customs and practices are ignored; still, few of the traditional practices and beliefs are performed and strictly followed. Being a human being the perception regarding beliefs, traditional customs, the concept of the supernatural spirit, etc. always surrounded by an environment that cannot be ignored. Menstruation which was considered to be impure, the data shows that the girls were refraining from religious practices, cooking food, and other usual household chores. In Assamese, menstruation is termed as '*Mabekiya* or *Nuwara hua*'. The most common restriction was not indulging in religious practices, and not going to places of worship until seven to 10 days from the day of menstruation. Restriction in entering the kitchen and touching off the pickles during those days is prohibited. They believe that during periods, certain odour emits from the body which turns the preserved food spoiled. The prohibition on eating in a separate place, and having separate utensils are not in practice among them. Among them wearing new clothes for those days is not practice rather wearing new cloth is only performed when they experience it for the first time. In bygone days, the girls usually remained confined in a separate room and suppose to take separate bedding and clothing, and male members are strictly prohibited to enter those rooms and even girls were not permitted to come in front of the male members of the family. Females feel uncomfortable and shy to discuss the topic of menstruation as it believes to be kept secret. The females were urged to do so as they believe this might reduce the life span of the males. But now the restriction on facing the male is not prohibited. The impurity arising out of menarche is observed for three days as during these days the menstrual flow is heavy in comparison to the rest of the days. After three days the females were asked to wash off their hair, and clothes, clean the house and cut off their nails, hair, etc. However, some families perform such practices until the day the menstrual flow stops completely. During menses, the girls were often not allowed to go anywhere except schools. Even they are not allowed to go alone outside at night as they believe certain evil spirits that surround nature might harm them. So, precautions like carrying garlic, metallic piece, white mustard seeds, etc are believed to be keeping evil spirits away from menstruate females. Menstruating females are also not allowed to sit on the bed or sofa and are even prohibited from touching new grocery items and similar other items. During these days the girls were not prohibited from doing outdoor household activities as it was a belief among them that performing such household activities might help in getting relief from abdominal pain.

It has been reported that the majority of females suffer abdominal pain (dysmenorrhea) on the first day. They believe that abdominal pain during menstruation happens due to the contact and sharing of clothes with other females, sharing food, and sitting close to her as it is a kind of '*husora bemar*' (contagious disease) and this menstrual pain is transmitted from them. However, the females who were not ever experienced are

of opinion that they also believe it is a contagious disease but suffering may be due to some other reason. The intake of traditional medicine as prescribed by the local healers is highly prevalent among them. Some prefer to go to a doctor at the health centre. Again, many a time, they also consume a glass of warm water with a tablespoon of *ghee* which helps in relieving abdominal pain.

It is observed the majority of the girls reported that they use both sanitary napkins as well as old linen during the day of menses. The used cloth is washed and reused again. It is believed that using a sanitary pad leads to causes infection. Thus, for them using linen is highly preferred by the mothers during menstruation. Only while travelling or going out of the home, do they prefer to use sanitary napkins to prevent them from leakage. The napkins were mostly disposed of or burnt after use. After disposing of the napkins, they smeared the materials with mud so that no one can perform black magic by using them. It is also believed by some of the females that burning the napkin would make one suffer from irregular periods, burning sensation of the stomach, and abdominal pain. The napkins are also disposed of away from animals as there is a belief the odour might lead to suffering from menstrual pain. Nowadays, due to lack of space, they dispose of it by flushing them on the toilets. It has also been reported that some females tie a black thread on their waist and hand to keep them away from evil spirits locally termed as '*bahira bostu*'. The intake of traditional medicine for relieving abdominal pain is considered as safe as it causes no after-effects whereas taking allopathic medicine, they believe, may make the female infertile and create a hindrance in the future from experiencing motherhood. This traditional medicine is prepared in liquefied form from various medicinal plants and prescribed to take on an empty stomach in the morning during menses. However, some traditional healers prescribed tying the stem of '*bosh ghas*' around the waist until the pain subsides. It is believed that a mother can never tie a thread around the waist of her daughters, doing so the magical charm ceases to show results.

<i>Practices</i>	<i>Types</i>	<i>Incidence (%)</i>
Usage of sanitary napkins	Disposable pad	53.95
	Old linen	7.24
	Both	38.16
	None	0.66
Frequency of change (disposable napkin)	Once / day	13.38
	Twice / day	35.96
	Thrice/day	35.21
	2 – 3 times / day	9.15
	Four times/day	6.34

Social and Cultural Beliefs Associated with Menarche: A Case Study among the Ahom

Frequency of change (old linen)	Once / day	13.24
	Twice / day	29.41
	Thrice/day	23.53
	2 – 3 times / day	16.17
	Four times/day	8.82
	Five times/day	8.82
Type of wash	Bath soap	90.79
	Vaginal wash	3.29
	Bath soap & vaginal wash	1.97
	Normal water	3.95
Medicine intake	Yes	2.63
	Never	97.37
Water intake	Normal water	5.26
	Lukewarm water	31.58
	Both	63.16
Prescribed food	Leafy Vegetable & fruits	3.25
	Whole grains	2.60
	Boil meal	3.90
	No food restriction	90.26
Food avoided	Sugary/spicy/citrus	25.63
	Dairy product	6.53
	Legumes	5.03
	Processed food	0.50
	Fried food	1.01
	High-fat food	9.55
	Onion/bitter gourd/pumpkin/banana	3.52
	No food restriction	44.22
Consultation with the health expert	Homoeopathic	1.32
	Allopathic	7.89
	Traditional/ethnic	1.32
	Allopathic/traditional	0.66
	None	78.29

Avoidance of eating certain specific food is also reported by the majority of mothers such as raw milk, onion, lemon, egg, meats, papaya, sugary items, red tea, etc. Mothers reported that taking eggs during menses creates an odour, and other items such as milk,

papaya, sugary items, etc, increase the flow and lead to heavy bleeding. Eating green leafy vegetables is believed to regain the blood level and help in reducing weakness due to loss of menstrual bleed during menses. Mothers also do not allow drying the napkins that are worn during menses directly under sunlight and they were advised to dry up inside the house in a separate corner keeping them away from the male. The clothes were washed out in a separate corner, by placing a separate block of wood or cemented bricks near the tube wells. They were also advised to use separate soap for bathing and washing purposes on those days.

The majority of the females use antibacterial soap as a means to wash out intimate areas to keep them safe and free from infections. However, many of them use varieties of bath soap whatever that is available due to their low economic background. The Ahom also celebrate the attainment of menarche by inviting close relatives and performing various rituals which are commonly known as '*tuloni or hanti biya*'. On the fourth day, the girl was given a bath locally termed as '*Saari dina gaa dhua*' and given to wearing new clothes. The final rituals are performed as advised by the local astrologer. By determining the time of the attainment of menarche the parents were advised to perform the final rituals within seven to twelve days, locally, the term '*jung*' according to which they offered to the Brahmins to get rid of an impediment in her near future.

The majority of the Ahom women use disposable pads (53.95%). The use of old linen (7.24%) and the frequency of using both (38.16%) is also considerable in number. It is observed that most of the women change sanitary napkins two times a day (35.96 %) followed by the women changing napkins three times a day (35.21%), while 13.38 per cent of the women change napkins only one time a day. In the case of users of old linen, around 29.41 per cent of the women change old linen two times a day, 23.53 per cent of women change three times a day and about 8.82 per cent of the women change old linen at least four-five times a day.

The majority of females use bath soap as a means to wash out the genital areas (90.79%). The frequency of using intimate wash was observed to be 3.29 per cent, use of both shows the frequency of 1.97 per cent and 3.95 per cent of the females use normal water as a medium to wash out the intimate areas. The intake of medicines to avoid periods records only 2.63 per cent of the females who had ever taken medicine to avoid periods. Of the total females, it has been observed that the majority of them were used to consuming both normal and lukewarm water showing a frequency of 63.16 per cent. While 31.58 per cent of the females were habituated to intake only lukewarm water and takers of normal water showed a frequency of 5.26 per cent only. Among the Ahom females, the majority of them do not follow any restrictions regarding the preparation of food during periods (90.26 %). Only 3.90 per cent of females prefer to take boiled meals. Intake of leafy

vegetables or fruits shows a very nominal frequency of 3.25 per cent only. However, the avoidance of taking sugary or spicy items shows a considerable frequency (25.63%). Avoidance of high-fat foods shows a frequency of 9.55 per cent. It is been observed that the females prefer consulting the traditional healers (10.52 %) in their needs. Besides, a sizeable section of the females also prefers to consult an Allopathic doctor (7.89 %).

In the present study, the majority of the females use sanitary pads during menstruation. Similar studies were conducted in Andhra Pradesh (Ravish et al., 2018); Dibrugarh, Assam (Sonowal and Talukdar, 2019), and several others who reported that adolescents prefer to use pads as an absorbent. It was also reported that the subjects change the absorbent at least twice a day. A similar study was carried out among adolescent girls in tribal and social welfare hostels in Andhra Pradesh by Ravish et al (2018) shows sanitary pads usage during menstruation where changing of pads is found more than twice a day. The used pads are mainly disposed of by the females whereas some are used to flush off in the toilets. In the present study, a large portion of the subjects uses soap to wash out the genital area during menstruation. However, based on information from Assam (Barman et al., 2017); Andhra Pradesh (Ravish et al., 2018), Udaipur, Rajasthan (Tundia and Thakur, 2018), and many others reported that females prefer to use only water as a source to wash out their genital areas.

Concerning the intake of medicine, females are mainly consulted with herbal remedies. Similar practices are also found in Oman (Sanam et al., 2018) that during menstruation they mostly go for treatment on herbal remedies. A large section of the females drinks hot water to avoid menstrual cramps. Studies conducted in Baghdad, Iraq (Sadiq et al., 2019) also recorded that to avoid the pain they drink hot water. To keep the body healthy in many studies it is found they are advised to take leafy vegetables and other natural sources which contain protein, fibres, carbohydrates, etc.

Conclusion

Menstruation although a natural phenomenon in females considered an unclean and impure period in society since the hoary past and even exists today. In many societies, due to strict adherence to cultural beliefs, women were still imposed to follow the taboos. Practices relating to menstruation hygiene are a major concern as it creates a great impact on women's health. Unfortunately, a modest, imprecise, and imperfect understanding of menstruation is a great impediment in the path of the personal and menstrual hygiene management.

Recommendation

Awareness programmes on menstrual hygienic practices among adolescents are the need of the hour as any laxity in this regard may lead to reproductive tract infections and other diseases related to reproduction.

References

- Barman, Pushpita, Tulika Mahanta Goswami and Hemen Sharma. (2017). Menstrual hygiene practices and reproductive tract infection among slum-dwelling adolescent girls aged 15-19 years of Dibrugarh town, Assam, *Journal of Evidenced Based Medicine and Healthcare*, 4: 2062 - 66.
- Ravish, H.S., Iswarya Siddhareddy, M.T. Ramya, Nitu Kumari, and Pradeep Kumar, (2018). Menstrual hygiene practices and related infections among adolescent girls of an urban poor locality, *International Journal of Youth and Adolescent Health*, 5: 28-33.
- Sadiq, A.L., Salih Mayasah and A. Alan. (2019). Knowledge and practice of adolescent females about menstruation in Baghdad, *Journal of General Practice* 2: 138, doi:10.4172/2329-9126.100138
- Sanam, Anwar, Said Juhaina Al Jahwari Ahmed, Mazoun Nasser Rashid Al Kharousi, Al Adawi Asma Hamed Ahmed, Ruqaiya Abdul Samad, and Noor Al-Zubaidi. (2018). Knowledge and practices of Omani adolescent girls related to menstruation, *British Journal of Medical and Health Research*, 5(10): 47-55.
- Sonowal, Pranjal, and Kaushik Talukdar. (2019). Menstrual hygiene knowledge and practices amongst adolescent girls in urban slums of Dibrugarh town- A cross-sectional study, *Galore International Journal of Health Science and Research*, 4: 44-51
- Therese, M., and F. Maria. (2010). Menstrual hygiene in South Asia: A neglected issue for WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) programs. *Gender and Development*, 18 (1):99-113.
- Tundia, Mohnish N, and V Dhara Thakur. (2018). A study on menstrual hygiene practices and problems amongst adolescent girls in Udaipur, Rajasthan, *International Journal of Community Medicine and Public Health*, 5 (8): 3486-91.