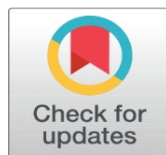
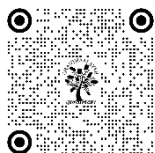


MENSTRUATION AND POWER POLITICS IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Menstruation, apart from being considered a normal menstruation process, is also a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by cultural norms, power dynamics, and language. The stigma and shame surrounding menstruation are silencing women by reinforcing the notion of inferiority and impurity, which are ways to perpetuate power imbalances in society. Menstruating women are restricted from participating in religious and sacred ceremonies and this cultural practice of considering menstruating women as the 'other' in the society plays a key role in constructing power politics in the society. The present paper deals with analysing various studies on menstruation to find out the views of various writers on menstruation. The present study aims to analyse how societal attitudes and practices related to menstruation can mirror and perpetuate power imbalances. This study also attempts to find out how menstruation plays a key role in constructing power politics in contemporary society.

Keywords: Menstruation, Menstrunormativity, Menarche, Power, Taboo, Stigma

1. PURPOSE

Menstruation, a natural biological process, is often treated as abnormal in most of the patriarchal societies. This perspective reinforces the expectation to hide the experience, aligning with the concept of "menstrunormativity." Across nearly all cultures, menstruation is surrounded by social taboos and persistent stigmas. This mindset enforces silence and discomfort, stigmatizing a process essential to human reproduction. Cultural taboos further alienate menstruating individuals, subjecting them to exclusion and discrimination in various spheres of life, from religious practices to professional spaces. Such stigmas foster misinformation, hinder open dialogue, and impede access to menstrual healthcare. Breaking these barriers is essential for fostering equality, dignity, and holistic well-being.

2. METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research methodology is applied to analyse various studies on menstruation to identify the role of menstruation in creating power politics in India. The Review of Literature is carried out by collecting data from various online sources, publications of world-famous publishers, handbooks of some health agents and other educational resources.

3. FINDINGS

There are various studies on menstruation and several aspects of menstruation. But little is discussed on how menstruation is used to construct power in a male-dominated society. Menstruation intersects with various factors such as caste, culture, and gender which play a key role in constructing power in the society. Menstruating women are excluded from the normal cultural practices by labelling them as 'Other', which is one of the ways of controlling women's bodies by the male-dominant society.

4. ORIGINALITY

This paper makes a true study on how menstruation plays a key role in constructing power in India. Various resources have been reviewed to collect information to justify my findings. Various cultural aspects of menstruation in India are analysed to make the paper an informative one.

5. INTRODUCTION

Menstruation has long been branded as an offensive topic in Indian society, masked in privacy and humiliation. Menstruation serves as a biological indicator of reproductive health, with regular cycles suggesting optimal physiological functioning and overall well-being. Indian culture always treats menstruation as a taboo topic and the cultural practices surrounding menstruation in India play a crucial role in constructing menstruation as a taboo topic. If we look at history, one can understand that the negative ideas associated with impurity and pollution are always attributed in connection with menstruation and menstruating women are given an inferior status in society. Unfortunately, almost all communities in India imposed restrictions on women during the period of menstruation because of considered menstruating bodies as impure and emitting negative energy during the time.

6. OBJECTIVES

- 1) To review various literature on menstruation.
- 2) To identify the research gap based on the review.
- 3) To develop a research proposal after identifying the research gap.
- 4) To identify the research area.

7. LITERARY OVERVIEW

Bobel, C (2010) in the work *New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation* (2010) tries to explain the role of various political activism in bringing menstruation a part of mainstream discussion thereby reinforcing women empowerment. The writer also discusses how menstruation becomes an active part of the discussion of third-world feminism, thereby intersecting culture and gender. This intersectional approach to menstruation expands the scope of this book which goes beyond sexual and gender barriers. Chris Bobel critiques early menstrual activism for its reliance on essentialist narratives that celebrated menstruation solely as a marker of womanhood. She contrasts this with the approach of third-wave feminists, who emphasize intersectionality and inclusivity, recognizing the diverse ways race, class, and gender identity shape menstrual experiences. The book advocates for actionable, grassroots efforts that prioritize policy reforms, improved access to menstrual products, and comprehensive education. By linking menstruation to broader social justice concerns, Bobel emphasizes the need for systemic change to dismantle stigma and promote equity.

Hufnagel, G. (2012) in her work *History of Women's Menstruation from Ancient Greece to the Twenty-First Century: Psychological, Social, Medical, Religious and Educational Issues* explores the cultural evolution of menstruation in Europe and Euro-American culture over some time. The study delves deeply into exploring the cultural practices and social attitudes involved in various menstrual practices beginning from ancient Greek culture to the present twenty-first century. The study tries to analyse the role of religion in attributing a negative status to menstruating women, imposing various restrictions such as participating in religious rituals, attending public functions etc. Modern medical studies try to explain the importance of menstruation in human life, but patriarchy imposes restrictions on menstruating women, giving them a secondary, inferior status.

Religion plays a key role in imposing menstrual stigma in society. Bhartiya, A. in her article 'Menstruation, Religion and Society' examines the role of religion in imposing restrictions on menstruating women. She examines various religions such as Judaism, Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism, and Sikhism to analyse how menstruation and menstruating women are supposed to be treated as per the religious beliefs. The paper also investigates the euphemistic terms used to describe menstruation, revealing how language plays a role in perpetuating silence and secrecy around the topic. These terms often reflect discomfort and an attempt to avoid direct acknowledgement of menstruation, further reinforcing taboos. Bhartiya critically examines how religious narratives and practices contribute to viewing menstrual blood as 'impure,' a belief that underpins many cultural restrictions, such as barring menstruating women from religious spaces or rituals.

In her compelling work *The Menstrual Taboo and Modern Indian Identity*, Norris J. offers a nuanced exploration of how menstrual taboos are intricately woven into the fabric of Indian cultural and national identity. The book provides a profound archaeological and sociological examination of the mechanisms through which menstruation becomes a powerful tool of social control and cultural demarcation. Delving deep into the historical landscape, Norris traces the roots of menstrual stigmatization to ancient Vedic texts, meticulously unravelling the complex genealogy of restrictions that have marginalized menstruating women for centuries. By critically analysing sacred scriptures and historical documents, she reveals how these practices are not merely random cultural artefacts but systematic technologies of gender oppression. The work illuminates the intricate ways in which religious spaces become sites of exclusion, where menstruating women are systematically rendered invisible and impure. Norris demonstrates how these practices extend beyond religious institutions, permeating social structures and national narratives. Particularly compelling is her analysis of the Hindu nationalist movement's role in perpetuating and reinforcing these gendered hierarchies, showing how menstrual taboos become a mechanism for constructing and policing female identity. By connecting historical practices with contemporary social dynamics, Norris exposes how menstrual stigma is not a static phenomenon but a continually reproduced system of power that shapes individual experiences and collective cultural imagination. Her work challenges readers to recognize menstruation not just as a biological process, but as a potent site of political and social negotiation.

It's Only Blood: Shattering the Taboo of Menstruation by Dahlqvist, A. tries to shatter the taboo of menstruation by discussing the personal experience of various girls who become a butt of laughter in front of society, considered unclean, impure during the time of menstruation. The author also shares her interview with one of the researchers in Uganda who says that she feels a chill or twinge of embarrassment when she asks her partner who does not menstruate to buy menstrual products even though they both work with menstruation, lecturing and writing articles (Dalquist, 2018). Various experiences of menarche are also shared to show the negative situations where menstruating women are placed.

Nithin Sridar's groundbreaking work *The Sabarimala Confusion: Menstruation Across Cultures A Historical Perspective* provides a comprehensive examination of menstrual taboos, using the controversial Sabarimala temple entry issue as a critical lens to explore deeper sociocultural dynamics surrounding menstruation in India. The book transcends a singular narrative, offering a multi-layered analysis that interrogates the intersection of religious practices, cultural beliefs, and gender discrimination. By conducting an extensive cross-cultural investigation, Sridar meticulously deconstructs menstrual myths across diverse religious traditions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism. His scholarly approach goes beyond surface-level observations, diving deep into ancient religious texts like Brahmanas, Dharma sastras, and Kama sastras to uncover the historical genealogy of menstrual stigmatization. The Sabarimala controversy serves as a pivotal case study, revealing how ancient religious prescriptions continue to shape contemporary social norms and legal debates. Sridar's research reveals how menstrual taboos are not static relics of the past, but dynamically reproduced systems of power that persistently marginalize women's experiences and bodily autonomy.

Through rigorous textual analysis and comparative religious studies, the book challenges readers to recognize menstruation not merely as a biological process, but as a complex socio-religious construct that reflects broader mechanisms of gender control and cultural governance. By tracing these narratives across multiple religious traditions, Sridar offers a nuanced understanding of how menstrual stigma is systematically embedded in cultural consciousness.

Bobel, C. (2020) in *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies* deals with various issues related to menstruation such as gender inequality, menstrual health, politics of menstruation, menstrual discourses, menstrual activism, menstrual justice etc. in this open-access book, the writer comes across the problems of almost all categories ranging from the mainstream to the subaltern. Personal narratives of people from different parts of the world help the readers to understand the uniqueness of menstrual taboo and how it becomes a part of one's culture. Menstrual activism is seriously discussed in this work which throws light in the readers to understand the need and importance of good and hygienic menstrual health. A discussion on the menstrual experience of those from slums, prisons and trans people is what makes this work unique.

Sinu Joseph (2020) in *RTU Vidya: Ancient Science Behind Menstrual Practices* explains the scientific reasoning behind menstrual practices and tries to answer various questions regarding menstrual practices including menstrual seclusion, religious restrictions etc. Every aspect related to menstruation is analysed with a scientific perspective which will help the readers to understand the science behind following all menstrual taboos developing such scientific knowledge will help the readers to develop a positive approach towards menstruation, not treating it as a social stigma. This new perspective on menstruation is something novel to the readers and researchers which will help them to develop a new perspective on menstruation which is entirely different from the ideology which the society is following since the ancient period. RTU means Rutu, which is a term used in Sanskrit for menstruating women.

'Menstruation and Indian Culture Taboos' by Dr. Ashish Saini discusses the various menstrual taboos in India and also speaks about period poverty in India. Dr. Ashish Saini's comprehensive work provides a profound exploration of the multifaceted landscape of menstrual experiences in India, critically examining the deep-rooted cultural narratives and socioeconomic challenges surrounding menstruation. The book meticulously unpacks the intricate web of cultural taboos that have historically marginalized menstruating individuals, revealing how these practices are more than mere social customs—they are sophisticated mechanisms of gender control and systemic oppression. Saini delves into the complex intersections of tradition, religion, and social stratification that perpetuate menstrual stigma across diverse Indian communities.

Farah Ahamed's (2022) *Period Matters: Menstruation in South Asia* is a pioneering anthology which discusses varied understandings of menstruation of people belonging to diverse parts of South Asia. To discuss varied experiences on menstruation, different literary genres such as essays, interviews, art forms, and stories are used in this work which makes the narration a novel one. The writer also analyses the role of caste in constructing menstrual stigma in South Asia. Menstrual experiences of trans persons are described in a nuanced way which is shocking to those who come across the work. She also discusses the recent innovations in technology to make the flow a smooth one and to ensure period safety and period hygiene.

Crawford, B. (2022) in *Menstruation Matters: Challenging the Law's Silence on Periods* examines the role of law in creating a healthy awareness of menstruation among people in the world. Menstrual concealment is what we are still following and the writer speaks of the role of law in bringing menstruation to the 'public space', not seeing the topic as silent, which is private and secret. The author examines the menstrual issues of various sections of society and speaks of the role of law in bringing healthy menstrual education to society.

8. RESEARCH GAP

Most research focuses on menstruation in generalized terms, overlooking how race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, or geographic location affect menstrual experiences. Despite growing academic attention, significant gaps remain in this area. While stigma is widely acknowledged, there is insufficient understanding of its cultural and religious dimensions and how it affects women's lives in diverse contexts. Research often excludes how women are marginalised at the time of menstruation, how power structures are created based on menstruation, and how menstruation is constructed and discussed in diverse linguistic, cultural, and religious contexts. despite their significant role in perpetuating or dismantling menstrual stigma. This study attempts to analyse how menstruation creates power politics thereby inferiorizing women and giving them a secondary status to non-menstruating women.

9. RESEARCH PROPOSAL

The proposed research aims to explore various social customs and practices in India to analyse the role of menstruation in constructing power politics in India. There are several studies on menstruation in general, but only limited studies are there on analysing the role of menstruation in creating power strictures in countries like India. In a nation as culturally diverse as India, the role of menstruation in constructing and perpetuating power structures reveals a remarkably consistent and intricate mechanism of social control that transcends regional, linguistic, and religious boundaries. Menstruation-related taboos and restrictions have been consistently used as tools to marginalize and control individuals, primarily women and menstruating people. Practices such as barring menstruating individuals from participating in religious rituals, restricting their mobility, or framing menstruation as 'impure' reveal how power operates subtly yet pervasively.

The proposed study aims to identify the following objectives:

- To understand the cultural practices related to menstruation in India
- To identify how women are subjugated by men during the period of menstruation
- To analyse how menstruating women are subordinated by non-menstruating women
- To find out how power stricture works in a country like India where there are cultural diversities, religious diversities, linguistic diversities, and ethnic diversities.

10. CONCLUSION

Menstruation in India serves as a microcosm of broader socio-political inequalities. Cultural taboos, systemic neglect, and power politics continue to marginalize menstruating individuals, particularly from disadvantaged communities. Addressing these issues requires a multi-pronged approach that integrates policy reform, community engagement, and feminist advocacy to dismantle the structural barriers perpetuating menstrual inequity.

Religious institutions in India have historically weaponized menstrual practices as sophisticated mechanisms of social stratification and gender control. The intricate system of menstrual exclusion represents a nuanced strategy for maintaining patriarchal dominance through spiritual and cultural narratives.

Women's systematic exclusion from sacred spaces during menstruation is not merely a cultural practice but a calculated method of reinforcing gender-based power hierarchies. In temples, mosques, gurudwaras, and other religious spaces, menstruating women are constructed as temporarily "impure" - a designation that fundamentally challenges their spiritual agency and social legitimacy.

Religious gatekeepers meticulously craft and maintain these exclusionary practices, utilizing complex theological interpretations that position menstruation as a transgressive experience. By defining menstrual blood as inherently contaminating, these institutions create elaborate ritual protocols that systematically diminish women's spiritual autonomy.

In Hindu contexts, for instance, menstruating women are often prohibited from engaging in traditional workplace, entering temple premises, participating in religious ceremonies, touching sacred objects, cooking for family members and engaging in traditional workplace practices. These restrictions are not passive cultural artefacts but active political technologies of control. They transform biological processes into instruments of social discipline, ensuring women's continuous negotiation of their own bodily experiences within predetermined patriarchal frameworks.

The power dynamics embedded in these practices extend beyond immediate religious spaces. They permeate familial structures, social interactions, and individual psychological landscapes, creating internalized mechanisms of self-regulation and conformity. Moreover, these religious control mechanisms are not monolithic but dynamically adapted across different regional and cultural contexts. They represent sophisticated, context-specific strategies for maintaining gendered power relations through spiritual discourse. By constructing menstruation as a state of temporary spiritual contamination, religious institutions effectively create a continuous cycle of female marginalization - where women are simultaneously revered as divine manifestations and systematically excluded from spiritual participation. This paradoxical treatment of menstruating women in religion is deteriorating the position of women and at the same time enhancing her by attributing a divine position.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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