

Original Research Article

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Myths Associated with Menarche and Menstruation among Tribal Females of Kargil District, Jammu and Kashmir

Sabiya Asmat^{1*}, Sarika Manhas² and Tashi Dolkar³

¹Krishi Vigyan Kendra, Kargil I, S. K University of Agriculture Science & Technology of Kashmir, Jammu and Kashmir, India

²Department of Home Science, University of Jammu, Jammu and Kashmir, India

³Krishi Vigyan Kendra, Kargil II, S. K University of Agriculture Science & Technology of Kashmir, Jammu and Kashmir, India

**Corresponding author*

ABSTRACT

Despite being a phenomenon unique to girls, this has always been surrounded by secrecy and myths in many societies. Taboos surrounding menstruation exclude women and girls from many aspects of social and cultural life. Some of these are helpful, but others have potentially harmful implications (Kaiser, 2008). The main objective of the present study was to assess the myths associated with menarche and menstruation among tribal females of Kargil. The sample for the study comprised of 520 tribal respondents of Kargil district, which comprised of 320 unmarried adolescent girls in the age group of 14-18 years, 100 mothers and 100 grandmothers. Interaction with the females of the two tribes highlight that there are many myths and restrictions associated with menarche and menstruation. These myths and restrictions have generally been passed from older generation to newer generation for many years now. It is in fact, difficult to cite when and from where these myths and restrictions came into existence, but majority of menstruating females emphasized that they agreed with these prevailing myths. The older generation of females especially the grandmothers and mothers followed and believed in these myths. However, adolescent girls either thought of these myths as erroneous or were not sure about the authenticity or practical viability of these myths.

Keywords

Menstruation,
Tribals, Kargil,
Myths and
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Introduction

Menstruation has been surrounded by taboos and myths that eliminate women from many aspects of socio-cultural life. Many cultures hold on different beliefs and myths that restrict women from daily activities and hygienic health practices, which lead to

adverse outcomes such as infection (Dasgupta and Sarkar, 2008). Menstrual cycle is an integral part of a female's life which due to the superstitions and myths followed by the families and others in the community, gets dangerously ignored and is not given importance. Many communities world over have gone through centuries of myths and

taboos that have created an ideology of the female body which has continued to impact the lives of women and girls in modern society. Religious teachings, traditional practices and cultural beliefs, have all played their role in the ideology of stigmatizing the menstruating woman. Sadly such myths have led to 48% of girls in Iran, 10% in India, and 7% in Afghanistan believing that menstruation is a disease, it is the removal of bad blood from the body, rather than a natural and healthy part of adolescence or young adulthood (SOS Children's Village, 2014). In rural Nepal, menstruating girls are sometimes forced out of their homes and forbidden from contact with people, animals and even plants. The practice of sequestering girls in menstrual huts is harmful to them, and sometimes fatal (Dineen, 2019).

Our menstrual practices are embedded strongly in religious and cultural contexts (Shuttle and Redgrove, 2005) and have in fact become a part of our daily life. The rural and tribal adolescent girls are especially vulnerable on account of limited access to health care and a dominant socio-cultural ecology (Singh, 2006; Khanna *et al.*, 2005). With this as background, the present study explores the Myths associated with Menarche and Menstruation among Tribals of Kargil Jammu and Kashmir state of India.

Materials and Methods

Sample and sample size

The sample for the study was divided into 3 groups

Group I

Comprised of 320 unmarried adolescent girls, in the age group of 14-18 years, selected equally from Balti tribe and Purig tribe, of Kargil District.

Group II

Consisted of 100 mothers (50 from Purig tribe and 50 from Balti tribe), who had at least one adolescent daughter, who were again selected randomly and equally, from the two tribes.

Group III

Consisted of 100 grandmothers (50 from Purig tribe and 50 from Balti tribe), who had at least one adolescent granddaughter experiencing menstruation, drawn randomly from Kargil block and Sankoo block of Kargil District. A self-structured interview schedule, Checklist and focus group discussion was used, to assess the information of sample, females regarding menarche and menstruation

Results and Discussion

Myth: "Menstruating Women and Girls are Unclean"

Fact: Menstruation is a sign of health and normal development. Menstrual blood is the same as blood from anywhere else in the body and is usually sterile. Girls should always maintain good hygiene throughout their menstrual periods

Data in table 1 shows that Majority of females across generations (girls 86.2%, mothers 96% and grandmothers 100%) accepted the myth that, menstruating women and girls are unclean. These respondents reported that because of its impurity the menstruating women were not supposed to offer prayers during menstruation. They further added that we do not know why it is considered as impure but it directed by our God "Allah" and being a follower of Islam we have to believe this as true. The myth that menstruating women are unclean and polluting is widespread in the cultures of many developing countries. It includes the myth that

women's excretions are considered to be polluting during menstruation (and childbirth as well) (Kumar and Srivastava, 2011; Yesmin *et al.*, 2008; Ten, 2007). In Mali, some tribes have exclusion huts, where women are sent to stay during their menstruation, excommunicating them from their families for 4-5 days, however they are not excluded from work (Kivuvani, 2013). Statistical analysis show highly significant differences across generations and also between girls of Purig and Balti tribes. No doubt that majority of respondents viewed this statement as true but there are few respondents (9.3% girls and 4% mothers) who thought that this wasn't true. Comparatively more Balti girls agreed with this than the Purig girls. However, no significant differences were seen between mothers and grandmothers of these two tribes, as both held the similar views.

Myth: Menstrual Blood is “Dirty Blood” that Does not Come out of the Body when one misses her Period

Fact: Blood discharged during periods is regular blood in the body. It is also not impure. Menstruation is a sign of health and normal development. Menstrual blood is the same as blood from anywhere else in the body and is usually sterile. Girls should always maintain good hygiene throughout their menstrual periods.

Data contained in the table 2 depicts that majority (68.1% girls, 69% mothers and 100% grandmothers) of respondents reported that it is true that menstrual blood is “dirty blood” that does not come out of the body when one misses her period. These respondents also reported that monthly cycle is important for every menstruating woman, to flush out the toxins and impure blood from the body as it helps to clean the body. A woman tends to have clear and glowing skin

after finishing her monthly cycle. Data indicates that just like other parts of the world, here also menstrual blood is considered as ‘dirty’. George (2014) found that menstruation is dirty, and a menstruating girl is a powerful, polluting thing, a thing to be feared and shunned. Similarly, most of the Kargil women also viewed menstrual blood as dirty, however the reasons are different. Findings also show that this myth is popular mostly among older generation compared to younger generation. This indicates that younger girls may be having more relevant information, probably from schools books (science books) and media. Statistical analysis shows that significant difference exist among the three generations and between early and late adolescent girls ($p = 0.00$) as more late adolescent girls viewed this as true than early adolescent girls. Tribe wise analysis show that more Balti adolescent girls and mothers were likely to think of this statement as true than Purig adolescent girls and mothers (highly significant difference was found between them, $p = 0.00$). But no difference was found between Balti grandmothers and Purig grandmothers as all the sample grandmothers agreed that menstrual blood is “dirty blood” that does not come out of the body when one misses her period.

Myth: “Menstruation Symbolizes Psychological and Physical Maturity among Females”

Fact: a) A girl's body is still developing after she has started menstruating. Getting married and having a baby before the age of 18 can lead to health problems for the mother and child.

b) Menstruation is an important stage in a girl's maturation, yet it does not mean a girl is ready for marriage

The data in the figure 1 depicts that majority of the mothers (76%) and grandmothers

(53%) of Kargil believed that “menstruation symbolises psychological and physical maturity among females”. The older generation females mostly felt that, girls are ready of marriage after menarche. She is physically prepared to bear a child to continue the human race/family lineage. However, majority of adolescent girls (43.7%) did not believe in this, as they did not see any direct linkage between puberty and maturity. Only 26.5% of the sample girls considered this as true, because they felt that the information passed from mothers and grandmothers can never be incorrect. Another 29.6% of these girls were not sure about the accuracy of this belief. These respondents reported that in olden days menarche was not considered as a sign of marriage as then many girls even got

married at 10, 12 or 13 years, much before attaining menarche. Statistical analysis showed that there is a highly significant difference (p=0.000) across the three generations on this belief.

Tribe wise, more Purig respondents in all the three age groups (33.1% girls 100% and mothers and grandmothers) believed in this statement as compared to their Balti counterparts (20% girls, 52% mothers and 6% grandmothers). Highly significant difference (p=0.000) was also found between early adolescent girls and late adolescent girls; as majority (43.2%) of early adolescent girls weren't sure about this belief whereas, majority (63.4%) of late adolescent girls reported that this was not true.

Table.1 Menstruating Women and Girls Are Unclean

Response	Purig		Balti		Early Ado.	Late Ado.	Girls		Mothers		Grandmothers		Females		
	14-16 Years N=77	16-18 Years N=83	14-16 Years N=87	16-18 Years N=73	14-16 Years N=164	16-18 Years N=156	Purig N=16	Balti N=16	Purig N=50	Balti N=50	Purig N=50	Balti N=50	Girls N=32	Mothers N=100	Grandmothers N=100
True	73 (94.8)	45 (58.4)	87 (100)	71 (97.2)	160 (100)	116 (74.3)	118 (73.7)	158 (98.7)	46 (92)	50 (100)	50 (100)	50 (100)	276 (86.2)	96 (96)	100 (100)
False	-	30 (38.9)	-	-	0	30 (19.2)	30 (18.7)	-	4 (8)	-	-	-	30 (9.3)	4 (4)	-
Not sure	4 (5.1)	8 (9.6)	-	2 (2.7)	4 (2.4)	10 (6.4)	12 (7.5)	2 (1.2)	-	-	-	-	14 (4.3)	-	-
Chi-sq between early and late adolescent girls 39.4**, P=0.0, df=2							Chi-sq between Purig and Balti girls 42.9**, P=0.0, df=2		Chi-sq between Purig and Balti mothers 4.16, p=0.041, df=1		-		Chi-sq across generation =22.17 **, p=0.000, df=4		

Table.2 Menstrual Blood is “Dirty Blood” that does not come out of the Body when one misses her period

Responses	Purig		Balti		Early Ado.	Late Ado.	Girls		Mothers		Grandmothers		Females		
	14-16 Years N=77	16-18 Years N=83	14-16 Years N=87	16-18 Years N=73	14-16 Years N=164	16-18 Years N=156	Purig N=16	Balti N=160	Purig N=50	Balti N=50	Purig N=50	Balti N=50	Girls N=32	Mothers N=100	Grandmothers N=100
True	44 (57.1)	52 (67.5)	57 (65.5)	65 (89.0)	101 (61.5)	117 (75)	96 (60)	122 (76.25)	19 (38)	50 (100)	50 (100)	50 (100)	218 (68.1)	69 (69)	100 (100)
False	-	14 (18.1)	-	4 (5.4)	-	18 (11.5)	14 (8.7)	4 (2.5)	16 (32)	-	-	-	18 (5.6)	16 (16)	-
Not sure	33 (48.8)	17 (20.4)	30 (34.4)	4 (5.4)	63 (38.4)	21 (13.4)	50 (31.2)	34 (21.2)	15 (30)	-	-	-	84 (26.2)	15 (15)	-
Chi-sq between early and late adolescent girls 36.8**, P=0.000, df=1						Chi-sq between Purig and Balti girls tribe wise 11.7**, P=0.002, df=2		Chi-sq between Purig and Balti mothers tribe wise 44.9**, p=0.000, df=2		-		Chi-sq across generation =55.6 **, p=0.000, df=4			

Table.3 It is very disgraceful for females when a man finds out that a woman is having her period

Response	Purig		Balti		Early Ado.	Late Ado	Girls		Mothers		Grandmothers		Females		
	14-16 Years N=77	16-18 Years N=83	14-16 Years N=87	16-18 Years N=73	14-16 Years N= 164	16-18 Years N=156	Purig N=160	Balti N=160	Purig N=50	Balti N=50	Purig N=50	Balti N=50	Girls N=320	Mothers N=100	Grand mothers N=100
True	77 (100)	83 (100)	87 (100)	73 (100)	164 (100)	156 (100)	160 (100)	160 (100)	50 (100)	50 (100)	50 (100)	50 (100)	320 (100)	100 (100)	100 (100)
False	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Not sure	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

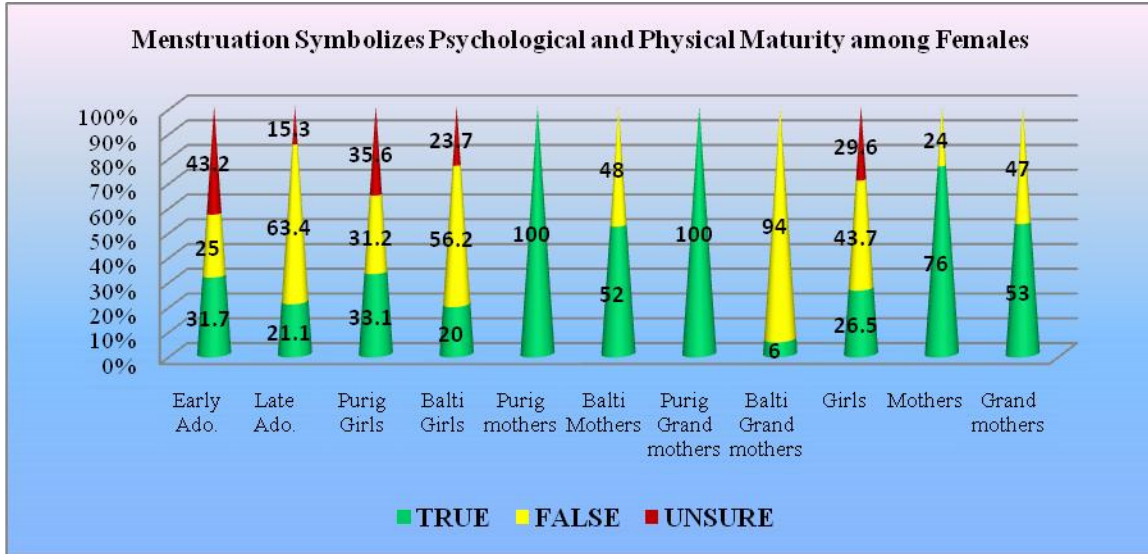
Table.4 A female can't get pregnant during periods

Response	Purig		Balti		Early Ado.	Late Ado	Girls		Mothers		Grandmothers		Females		
	14-16 Years N=77	16-18 Years N=83	14-16 Years N=87	16-18 Years N=73	14-16 Years N= 164	16-18 Years N=156	Purig N=160	Balti N=160	Purig N=50	Balti N=50	Purig N=50	Balti N=50	Girls N=320	Mothers N=100	Grand mothers N=100
True	4 (5.1)	4 (5.1)	-	-	4 (2.4)	4 (2.5)	8 (5)	-	11 (22)	-	-	-	8 (2.5)	11 (11)	-
False	4 (5.1)	24 (31.1)	1 (1.1)	7 (9.5)	1 (1.5)	7 (4.4)	28 (17.5)	8 (5)	16 (32)	50 (100)	50 (100)	50 (100)	36 (11.2)	66 (66)	100 (100)
Not sure	73 (94.8)	51 (61.4)	86 (98.8)	66 (90.4)	159 (96.9)	117 (75.0)	124 (77.5)	152 (95)	23 (46)	-	-	-	276 (86.2)	23 (23)	-
Chi-sq between early and late adolescent girls 6.55*, P=0.03, df=2							Chi-sq between Purig and Balti girls 18.7**, P=0.000, df=2		Chi-sq between Purig and Balti mothers 46.6**, p=0.00, df =2		-		Chi-sq across generation =313.5**, p=0.000, df= 4		

Table.5 Early Menstruation means Early Menopause

Categories	Purig		Balti		Early Ado.	Late Ado	Girls		Mothers		Grandmothers		Females		
	14-16 Years N=77	16-18 Years N=83	14-16 Years N=87	16-18 Years N=73	14-16 Years N= 164	16-18 Years N=156	Purig N=160	Balti N=160	Purig N=50	Balti N=50	Purig N=50	Balti N=50	Girls N=320	Mothers N=100	Grand mothers N=100
True	2 (2.5)	8 (10.3)	12 (13.7)	39 (53.4)	14 (8.5)	47 (30.1)	10 (6.2)	51 (31.8)	46 (92)	50 (100)	50 (100)	50 (100)	61 (19)	96 (96)	100 (100)
False	-	20 (24.0)	1 (1.1)	14 (19.1)	1 (1.1)	34 (21.7)	20 (12.5)	15 (9.3)	4 (8)	-	-	-	35 (10.9)	4 (4)	-
Not sure	75 (97.4)	55 (71.4)	74 (85.0)	20 (27.3)	149 (90.8)	75 (48)	130 (81.2)	94 (58.7)	-	-	-	-	224 (70)	-	-
Chi-sq between early and late adolescent girls 51.36**, P=0.000, df=2						Chi-sq between Purig and Balti girls 20.4**, P=0.000, df=2		Chi-sq between Purig and Balti mothers 29.0, p=7e-8, df =1		-		Chi-sq across generations =43.9 ** p=0.000, df=4			

Fig.1 “Menstruation symbolizes psychological and physical maturity among females”



Myth: “It is very Disgraceful for Females when a Man finds out that a Woman is having her Period”

Fact: Menstruation is natural physiological changes in women, so there is no need to feel ashamed in front of males.

Perusal of the data contained in table 3 depict that all (100%) respondents across the three generation from both the tribes agreed that it is very disgraceful for females when a man finds out that a woman is having her period. Few women explicitly said that their daughter had been told to maintain silence during their periods. In fact, they were told to pretend in front of male family members to be observing fast during Ramazan month if menstruating but in reality they were not fasting. The data also revealed that girls of Kargil were socialized in such a way that menstruation is a hidden issue and not to be openly discussed especially with males. All the respondents hence thought it is very embarrassing when men finds out that a woman is having her period whether by some accidental situation, like spoiling of dress, avoiding of going to mosque or praying religious prayers etc. In all

these situations the other females of the family help to hide the matter from others.

Like many other tribes and communities of India where mention of the topic has been a taboo, here also in Kargil even today menstruation is considered a taboo.

Myth: “A female can’t get pregnant during periods”

Fact: It's not likely, but there's always a chance. Ovulation can be unpredictable and so can menstrual cycles.

Even though sex was prohibited during periods, yet some females also reported the existence of a belief that one cannot get pregnant during this time. Table 4 reveals that all (100%) sample grandmothers and most mothers (66%) reported that it is untrue that one can’t get pregnant during periods. The fact is that one can conceive during her monthly cycle as well. They further elaborated that according to Islam ‘if one conceives during menstruation then that child will be considered as illegal (haram)’ as stated in Holy book Quran. It is impermissible for a

Muslim to have sexual intercourse with his wife before her menstrual period is over and she has performed the important 'Ghusl' at the end of her period. Only 11% mothers and 2.5% adolescent girls thought that one cannot conceive during periods. Further, results reveal that generation wise older generation females were more aware about this myth than younger generation. This may be because the older generation females were married and had more sexual experience than the young girls. Statistical analysis shows highly significant difference across three generations. On the basis of tribe, some Purig girls and mothers believed on this myth. All mothers of Balti tribe considered this as untrue. Similarly, girls of Balti tribe mostly were unsure (95%) about the authenticity of this myth.

Myth: "Early Menstruation means Early Menopause"

Fact: There is no evidence of it and medical science does not approve of this.

Table 5 clearly shows that Another belief/myth that Early Menstruation means Early Menopause was agreed upon by 100% grandmothers, 96% mothers but only 19% adolescent girls. Some of the older respondents reported that those girls who got their menarche at an early age had maximum chance of attaining menopause at early age but all this is mainly dependent upon individual heredity, which may be from mother's or father's family. Among the three generation more grandmothers and mothers believed on this myth but majority (70%) adolescent girls were uncertain about this myth. Comparatively more late adolescent girls believed it as true where as more of early adolescent girls were uncertain about this myth. Irrespective of their tribal affiliation all grandmothers and mothers from both the tribes believed in the concept of 'Early

Menstruation leading to Early Menopause'. However, more Purig tribe girls were unsure of this belief. Statistically significant differences were found among all three generation and also between the two tribes for all the three selected age groups.

The tribal (Purig and Balti) females of Kargil tend to have specific menstrual beliefs, myths, taboos and restrictions. This construction is a part of their unique cultural and ethnic identity and has been passed from generation to generation. Both the tribes conceptualised menstruation as impure, dirty and distasteful phenomenon, which requires no mention in front of others. The elder females especially the grandmothers were very particular about following the menstrual beliefs and taboos. Mothers also to a larger extent followed these concepts. However, some changes were noted among the adolescent girls. They have now started feeling that some of the beliefs were erroneous and were not of much utility.

Recommendation

For ages women themselves tend to have limited and incorrect information about their own bodies and especially their reproductive system. Females continue to look at their bodies and its processes through the images created by the dominant males around them. Talking and communication about reproductive system and pubertal changes is strict taboo in most cultures including that of Kargil. As a result a number of myths and restrictions continue to flourish around menarche and menstruation. The only way these myths and restrictions are challenged and overcome is by creating awareness about the reproductive system and one's own bodies. Scientific and medical knowledge about puberty and pubertal changes is essential for all adolescent girls so that there is unconditional accepting it.

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