



Cover Page



AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY OF MENSTRUAL PRACTICES AMONG MENSTRUATING WOMEN IN RANCHI DISTRICT OF JHARKHAND

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Abstract

The present paper seeks to study the menstrual behaviors among women in Jharkhand's Ranchi district, from a socio-cultural anthropological viewpoint. It aims to investigate how cultural entrenched beliefs, taboos, constraints, ideas of purity and pollution, gender norms, household behaviors, and intergenerational knowledge transfer influence menstrual waste management in addition to understanding of menstruation hygiene. The study looks at differences in menstrual behaviors among various age groups, educational backgrounds, and socioeconomic situations and focuses on women from varied urban, rural, and tribal populations. The kinds of menstrual absorbents utilized, their availability and cost, usage patterns, storage, concealment, packaging, and disposal, as well as the interpretations and justifications women give to these behaviors, are all given special consideration. The study also aims to comprehend the sociocultural settings in which decisions about the disposal of menstrual waste are made, including the impact of mothers, older women, peers, family members, and community standards. It looks at menstruation taboos and prohibitions related to eating, moving about, participating in religion, doing household chores, interacting with others, and handling or discarding menstrual products. Improved menstrual hygiene, safer and environmentally sustainable disposal methods, culturally sensitive menstrual health interventions, and a decrease in stigma, misinformation, and restricting habits passed down through generations are all goals of the study.

Keywords: Anthropological, Menstrual waste, Socio-cultural, Sustainable, Tribal

Introduction

Although menstruation is a normal biological process that many women experience during their reproductive years, its significance transcends human biology. It is intricately linked to social structures, gender roles, cultural values, family practices, economic conditions, environmental issues, and public health systems. In many nations, menstruation has historically been linked to a range of ideas, including notions of impurity, contamination, concealment, and social restraint, as well as ideas of womanhood and reproduction. Therefore, menstruation



Cover Page



rituals cannot be solely understood as individual physical behaviors. Menstruating individuals are influenced by the social and cultural environments in which they manage their bodies, resources, relationships, and everyday lives. Therefore, in addition to menstrual health and hygiene, a thorough knowledge of menstruation requires consideration of the larger social processes that generate, regulate, and manage menstrual experiences. An increasingly important but little-researched component of menstruation management is the generation and disposal of menstrual waste. The widespread use of disposable menstruation products, particularly sanitary pads and other absorbent materials, has altered menstrual habits in many urban and semi-urban areas. Menstrual waste continues its journey when a lady who is menstruation discards a used absorbent. Rather, it enters a broader waste-management system in which several organizations may take part either directly or indirectly. Once menstrual material leaves the home, it may be transported by sanitation workers, waste pickers, municipal employees, transport workers, landfill workers, or other professionals involved in solid waste management.

Review of Literature

In Hindu mythology, there is a belief that women experienced '*Rajaswala Dosha*' (menstruation) when Lord Indra (the king of gods) severed the head of *Vishwaroopacharya* (the second teacher of the gods). Since Lord Indra killed one Brahmin, he got '*Brahmahatya dosha*'. He got rid of it by distributing it amongst the *prithvy* (land), *Samudra* (water), *vriksha* (tree) and *stree* (women folk). From that day on, the ladies were able to give birth and began to menstruate every 28 to 30 days. Menstruation is therefore thought to be a dosha.

Three gunas (or characteristics) are recognized in Indian yogic philosophy. These are *sattva* (white), *rajas* (red), and *tamas* (black). Sweat, blood, tears, and other bodily excretions are all considered toxic and fall under the category of *tamas*. *Tamas* is obscurity or darkness. Therefore, touching a woman who is menstruation is seen as "Tamasic" (improper) by traditional Hindus. Some women are prohibited from entering the kitchen and temples, sleeping during the day, taking a bath, wearing flowers, having intercourse, touching other men or women, talking loudly, and touching pickles when they are menstruating. A pickle touched by a lady who is menstruation is said to spoil. Menstruating girls are not permitted to touch the basil plant since it is revered in Hinduism. They aren't allowed to let even their shadow fall on it or it's believed the plant will die, in some extreme cases (Bhartiya, 2013).



Cover Page



Even bringing up the subject has historically been frowned upon in India, and social and cultural forces still seem to be a barrier to the growth of knowledge in this area. (Patil R, 2011). It is a normal process that often starts in girls between the ages of 11 and 14, and it is one of the signs that puberty has begun in them. In many communities, this phenomenon—which is exclusive to girls—has traditionally been shrouded in myths and secrecy. Menstruation-related taboos prevent women and girls from participating in many facets of social and cultural life. While some of these are beneficial, others may have negative effects (Kaiser., 2014).

Dasgupta and Sarkar (2008), in their study “Menstrual Hygiene: How Hygienic is the Adolescent Girl?”, investigated teenage girls' menstrual knowledge and hygiene habits in West Bengal. Their research revealed that menstruation is still ingrained in a larger system of cultural taboos, limitations, and insufficient understanding about reproductive health. The authors noted that a lack of knowledge about menstruation can affect how girls handle menstrual blood and materials, which can have an impact on their personal hygiene and health.

MacRae, Clasen and Dasmohapatra (2019) made a particularly significant contribution by studying menstruation in rural Odisha among women at various life phases. The researchers investigated the experiences of single women, recently married women, married women, and older women using focus groups and in-depth interviews. Their results showed that women's menstruation needs go beyond what is available in terms of absorbent materials. Women recognized the value of seclusion, hygienic supplies, soap and water, restrooms, and proper disposal methods (MacRae, Clasen, Dasmohapatra, & Caruso, 2019) Because it highlights the need of comprehending menstruation through women's everyday lived experiences, the study is particularly pertinent to the current endeavor.

Kumar and Srivastava (2011) examined cultural and social practices among 117 teenage girls aged 11 to 20 and 41 mothers from various communities and socioeconomic backgrounds, including residential colonies and urban slums, in one of the most immediately pertinent studies on menstruation in Ranchi (Kumar & Srivastava, 2011). Perceptions of menarche, menstrual knowledge, behavioral changes, limitations, taboos and myths, family reactions, and information sources were all examined in the study. The authors discovered significant differences between females who lived in slum neighborhoods and those who lived in urban residential areas. Social constraints were more noticeable among respondents from slums, especially those related to religious activities, mobility, and social engagement. The study



Cover Page



found that education, attitude, familial environment, cultural beliefs, and social context all influenced menstrual behaviors.

Toppo and Bara used a cross-sectional survey that included in-person interviews and family visits to investigate menstrual hygiene behaviors among teenage girls and women residing in urban slum regions of the Ranchi district. Their results show significant financial and infrastructure limitations. Inadequate water and sanitary facilities were also noted as significant contextual restrictions; over 63% of respondents reported using cloth during menstruation, while about 47% used sanitary pads (Toppo & Bara, 2019). The study also revealed that a significant percentage of participants were unable to routinely buy sanitary pads due to financial constraints.

Research Methodology

The current study used a mixed-method anthropological research design to investigate how menstruation women in Jharkhand's Ranchi area dispose of their waste and the sociocultural aspects that are related to these behaviors. A sample of 300 menstrual women, 100 from urban regions, 100 from rural areas, and 100 from tribal areas, were purposefully chosen to participate in the study. The sample was created to make it easier to compare the usage of menstrual absorbents, disposal methods, menstrual hygiene, taboos, limitations, beliefs, and attitudes in various sociocultural situations. Fifteen carefully chosen sites in the Ranchi district—urban, rural, tribal, and peri-urban—were used for the fieldwork. The broader field locations included Brajpur, Kathitand, Kantatoli, Kamre, Harmu, Brambe, Hinoo, Bariatu, Ashok Nagar, Manatu, Hindpiri, Mandar, Dhurwa, Kanke, Daladili, Tupudana, Firaylal, Cheri, Hehal, Kathartoli, Nagri, Kadru, Karam Toli and Jagannath Basti.

Numerous qualitative and ethnographic techniques, such as semi-structured and structured interviews, participant and non-participant observation, focus group discussions (FGDs), field notes, record keeping, and systematic documenting, were used to generate the data. In order to record narratives, practices, and contextual observations, audio and visual recordings were made where appropriate and with consent from the participants. Throughout the study process, field journals were kept to document observations, conversations, introspection, and new concepts. Because menstruation is often linked to stigma, privacy, and culturally sensitive beliefs, ethical considerations were crucial to the research process. Prior to interviews and recordings, individuals gave their informed consent. Building rapport was given first priority



Cover Page



in order to provide a welcoming and trustworthy research atmosphere and to encourage candid conversation on otherwise delicate situations. Confidentiality, anonymity, privacy, and voluntary participation were upheld throughout the research, and participants were made aware of the goal and extent of the study.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the menstrual absorbent-use and menstrual waste disposal practices among women across urban, rural and tribal settings of Ranchi district.
2. To explore the socio-cultural beliefs, taboos and restrictions associated with menstruation and menstrual waste disposal.
3. To analyse the influence of socio-demographic and intergenerational factors on menstrual hygiene and waste disposal practices.
4. To assess the implications of existing menstrual waste disposal practices for women's hygiene, well-being and environmentally sustainable menstrual waste management.

Absorbent choices among menstruating women

The study explores the factors, such as personal preferences, financial position, cultural acceptability, and market accessibility, that affect the choice of sanitary protection materials, or absorbents, among females in urban and rural locations of various age groups. According to fieldwork conducted in a variety of rural and urban places, including Brambe village, Murgu village, Manatu village, etc. in the Ranchi district, the absorbent choices of menstruation women have drastically altered, reflecting altering awareness, accessibility, and socioeconomic conditions. The menstrual absorbent habits of women in these regions show both the enduring nature of traditional customs and the sluggish uptake of modern sanitary products. Most middle-aged and older respondents said that reusable cloth was the most common and often the only menstrual absorbent utilized during their younger reproductive years. Cutting and folding soft material, old cotton saris, and other home items for use during menstruation was a common practice. After being washed, these pieces of fabric were frequently utilized again. This behavior was greatly influenced by financial limitations, a lack of awareness regarding menstrual hygiene products, and the shortage of sanitary napkins in local stores. Women stated that they were concerned about drying these reusable towels because menstruation is highly



stigmatized in society. While several women acknowledged that drying cloths in direct sunlight was more hygienic, many others stated that they preferred to dry them discreetly in concealed or dark sections of the house. The major reasons for this were shame and the fear that male family members or strangers might see the menstrual clothes. Displaying menstrual items in public was socially undesirable, and menstruation was seen as a private and often filthy thing. Poor hygiene and an increased risk of sickness were often the results of these behaviors.

Due to the increased availability of sanitary napkins in local stores, the usage of commercial sanitary pads is currently increasing, especially among younger women and teenage girls. Women claim that sanitary pads are more useful, hygienic, and suitable for daily activities including working, attending school, and performing agricultural labor. Growing awareness of cleanliness and health has also contributed to this change. Nonetheless, many women continue to use reusable fabric. Several Oraon women from the aforementioned areas stated that they still use reusable cloth made from leftover saris and soft household materials. The primary causes identified were poor financial conditions, inconsistent market access, and embarrassment about purchasing sanitary pads from retailers. Because some women were uneasy asking male store owners for sanitary napkins, their use was further discouraged. Many women also said that they had worn clothing since they were young and that it helps them feel more comfortable both psychologically and physically. For them, using cloth is not only an economical choice, but it's also a stable and cozy habit that permeates their daily lives. Additionally, some respondents claimed that cloth is more ecologically friendly and simpler to handle at home. Even if sanitary pads are becoming increasingly accepted, reusable cloth is still crucial due to budgetary constraints, cultural norms, social stigma, and personal comfort.



Fig.1.Fieldwork in different villages and schools of Ranchi



Cover Page



Meera Toppo, a 43-year-old Hindpiri resident, stated that she purposefully favors reusable cloth even if she has the money to purchase sanitary pads on a monthly basis. She explained that since her first menstruation, she has been wearing soft cotton fabric made from worn sarees because it helps her feel more relaxed. She says that compared to sanitary pads, which often cause irritation and a feeling of intense heat, particularly in the summer, cloth feels softer and more natural. She makes her decisions based more on comfort than necessity. "Our mothers taught us to use only cloth," she remarked. Recently married Manatu village resident Kajal Kumari explained that she uses both cloth and sanitary pads, depending on household finances. When her husband gets enough money from outside the hamlet, she buys sanitary pads; otherwise, she returns to wearing cloth. She clarified that the choice of menstruation absorbent is closely tied to monthly income rather than personal preference. "Pads are for when money is there; cloth is for when money is less," she replied.

Anita Tigga, an Oraon bride from Brambe village, claimed that her mother-in-law firmly preferred wearing traditional fabric and believed sanitary pads were unnecessary and wasteful. She explained that elder women in her married household believed reusable cloth to be more environmentally friendly and sensible. When she initially began using sanitary pads after getting married, her mother-in-law questioned her about why she was spending money on them. She eventually started using cloth napkins despite her personal preference for sanitary napkins because of pressure from her family and the need to settle in peacefully in the new house.

A married woman from Brambe village named Nirmala Tirkey said she had been using reusable towels for her periods for a very long time. She did, however, frequently suffer from headaches, lower abdominal pain, vomiting, and severe skin itching in the vicinity of her vagina. She initially believed that these symptoms were common to menstruation. However, the doctor at the local health center warned her that frequent use of damp or improperly dried cloth could cause discomfort and infections. She was advised to switch to sanitary pads and improve her period hygiene practices. After using sanitary pads, she reported feeling cleaner and experiencing less discomfort during her menstrual period. Sangita Kumari, a respondent from Hindpiri who is enrolled in college, disclosed that she purchases sanitary napkins from the surrounding town rather than the local village stores because she feels less scrutinized there. She said that girls who buy pads at rural stores are often observed and questioned, which makes them feel ashamed.



Cover Page



Menstrual Waste Disposal Practices

Kusum Kumari, a young girl from Kathitand, disclosed that after receiving sanitary pads from the school, she started using disposable pads frequently during class. However, she highlighted how difficult it is for her to let them go. She added that there are no garbage cans near her house and that the village lacks a suitable infrastructure for collecting rubbish. Because of this, she carefully wraps soiled pads in old newspaper before carrying them to isolated areas near fields so they can be disposed of. "I feel very ashamed if anyone sees the used pad, so I properly hide it before throwing it," she told me. She further mentioned that when dogs tear out improperly disposed-of pads, local girls feel scared and ashamed. Rosni Kumari, a married 23-year-old respondent from Murgu village, described how the absence of organized waste collection in the community affects women's menstrual disposal practices. She claims that because there are no local public garbage cans or disposal facilities, women usually burn dirty sanitary pads in the garden after dark. "We cannot throw pads openly because children and animals pull them out," she explains. She explained that burning is done in secret at night while other family members are sleeping. She did, however, also express dissatisfaction with the smoke and smell that are created while burning, especially when disposal takes place close to the house.

An older Oraon woman from Nagri village named Puspa Singh explained that because menstruation is typically seen as a private and unclean state within the home, menstrual waste must be kept out of the public eye. She claims that females are educated from a young age not to show menstruation cloth or pads to men or other individuals. "These things should remain secret because people consider them impure," she said. She continued by saying that menstrual cloth is always laundered separately from other household clothing due to deeply rooted cultural ideas about contamination and purity. Geeta Devi, a teenage girl from Kantatoli, disclosed that although she prefers sanitary pads, her family cannot afford to purchase them on a regular basis, so she only uses them for travel or exams. For the most part, she uses her mother's old material. She explained that girls in the household try to covertly burn sanitary pads to stop garbage from accumulating around the house. "Pads are useful, but using them every month is expensive for us," she replied.

Conclusion

A significant disparity between the institutional documentation of menstrual hygiene awareness initiatives and their actual visibility and execution at the local level was shown by the fieldwork conducted in Ranchi. The majority of study participants stated they were unaware of programs



Cover Page



like the Men for Menstruation (M4M) campaign, Chuppi Todo Swasth Raho campaign, and Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) Agenda, which were officially launched to raise awareness among teenage girls and women who are menstruating. Many teenage girls and older women who were menstruating were even unable to identify these programs or explain how they were directly involved in them. Another major issue discovered throughout the inquiry was the uneven and inadequate distribution of sanitary pads. The field observations also showed that awareness programs were often limited to formal documentation and institutional reporting without regular community interaction or follow-up. Many respondents stated that menstruation is still an issue of silence and resistance in both family and social settings. The field data revealed significant differences between policy-level representations of menstrual hygiene initiatives and the lived realities of menstruating women and adolescent girls in rural and semi-rural parts of Ranchi district.

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