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VEPACHEDU EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION

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Mana Sanskriti (Our Culture)

Chief Editor: Dr. Sreenivasarao Vepachedu, Esq.

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Menstrual Cycle and Culture

Introduction

Menstruation⁽²⁾ is a natural phenomenon that women go through periodically, hence called period, wherein her body sheds monthly the lining of the uterus, while menstrual blood flows from it through the small opening in the cervix and through the vagina. In general, menstrual period lasts from three to five days, with the average menstrual cycle follows closely lunar month, lasting 28 days long, unlike other primates. A regular menstrual cycle exists when periods come regularly, hinting important parts of the body are working normally, and the rise and fall of hormone levels during the month control the menstrual cycle.

Producing babies with big brains is rough, and female bodies work very hard each month to ensure that we have surviving offspring beating the odds. From a biological standpoint, gearing up for pregnancy each month is costly for the fairer sex. In past centuries, human fecundity resulted in a high level of mortality for women and babies, due to lack of the technology and medicine available today. Historically, one woman died for every hundred pregnancies. Globally, half a million women die each year due to complications of pregnancy and childbearing. In addition, the evolutionary disadvantages of menstruation include anemia and, in a world full of predators and disease, neither leaving a blood trail for predators to eat you up nor filling a delicate orifice with dying tissue for disease to fester is the safest survival technique. Instead, however, this costly affair of menstruation is a consequence of self-defense. Females build up that thickened uterine lining to protect and insulate themselves from the greedy embryo and its selfish placenta^(2a).

Further, the hormonal changes responsible for a woman's menstrual cycle also affect her brain in a number of ways. Estrogen, progesterone, and testosterone fluctuate during a woman's menstrual cycle. The hippocampus, hypothalamus, and the amygdala tend to be affected the most by the estrogen-progesterone surges and drops. The surges of these hormones can influence a woman's mood, self-esteem, and how she connects to others. Estrogen levels are closely linked with women's emotional well-being as estrogen affects

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parts of the brain that control emotions. A 2014 study published in the Journal of Neuroscience found greater increases in estrogen levels across the menstrual cycle compared to the beginning of menstruation when estrogen levels are low associated with impulsive behavior.

In addition, many women have mild to severe cramps associated with the period. About 75% of women experience a varying intensity at some point during menstruation. Pain experienced by women each month affects their ability to perform a range of complex tasks. According to a 2014 study published in the journal PAIN, menstrual cramps have a noticeably negative effect on a woman's ability to perform various tasks. Women with period pains had a lower performance rating comparable to their non-period counterparts as they struggled with attention-based jobs, such as competing targets and dividing their attention between two tasks.

Religious and Cultural Intolerance

Understanding the effects of the menstrual cycle on a woman's body and brain on a monthly basis helps women comprehend the natural phenomenon, its impact and various coping mechanisms including the cultural dos and don'ts developed by societies. Many young women are not aware of these coping mechanisms and get frustrated with their own culture and show impatience and disrespect towards other cultures, e.g., a Christian girl berates Hindu culture and religious practices in a Hindu temple⁽³⁾. Because Hindu religions are diverse their practices and rituals are various. The practices of a certain Hindu tribe/caste may be superstition and stupid for certain other Hindu tribes/castes, Hindu atheists, Hindu communists, Christians and Muslims. Therefore, many young Indian non-Hindus (including Hindu atheists, communists and secular Hindus) show impatience and disrespect toward the cultural practices of others.

Cultural and Religious Practices

As the human society advances technologically, some of the ancient practices are no longer needed, e.g., providing separate quarters and limiting women's movement is a very valid survival technique when we did not have tampons and pads, which became a cultural practice among many ancient cultures. The cultural practice of giving women

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time off from daily routine, if possible, may be a still valid practice, since 75% of women suffer through menstrual cramps during the period, every month.

It is a religious practice for various tribes/castes of Hindu religions to visit temples after taking a bath or shower, and enter the temple after washing their feet, hands and faces. Temples are sacred for the believers. Non-believers who have neither respect nor tolerance towards believers' practices should neither enter temples nor interfere in the customs of believers, because religious freedom is a fundamental right in modern democracies like the Indian Union and the United States of America. Secularism does not mean denigration and desecration of temples by flouting the rules and etiquettes practiced for thousands of years by Hindus. Access to temple of a certain culture is not a right for other cultures, but a privilege which must be exercised with due respect to the temple rules and sensitivities of the practitioners. Unfortunately, religious and cultural intolerance and disrespect is rampant in India⁽³⁾.

All major religions Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism of the world have placed restrictions on menstruating women, most probably due to the dangers and costs associated with menstruation, as explained above. Sikhism, being the youngest, is the only religion where the scriptures condemn sexism and don't impose any restriction on menstruating women⁽⁴⁾.

In Christianity, the history of menstrual taboo has been a major reason to keep women from positions of authority. A Christian menstruating woman is considered unclean and untouchable⁽⁵⁾. Catholic women should not have sexual intercourse during menses. Menstruating Christian women are not allowed to partake of sacraments, especially Communion, or even touch holy items like the Bible⁽⁶⁾. Over the centuries, many religious leaders have taught that women were made for childbearing. Reformation father Martin Luther stated: If a woman grows weary and, at last, dies from childbearing, it matters not. Let her die from bearing; she is there to do it^(6a).

In Islam, menstruating women are not supposed to touch the Quran, enter the Mosque, pray the 'salat' (the ritual prayer), or have sex with their husband⁽⁷⁾. The menstruating

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woman is exempted from rituals such as daily prayers and fasting. After the menstruation, the woman has to take a ritual bath before she becomes clean.

In Judaism, the Jewish code of law, Halakha, details strict rules governing every aspect of the daily lives of Jews, including their sexual lives. It prohibits literally any physical contact between males and females during the days of menstruation and for a week thereafter⁽⁸⁾ The entire period of time, from the beginning of the menses until she takes a ritual bath at the end of seven clean days, is called the 'Niddah period'⁽⁹⁾.

Hindus celebrate menarche, a girl's graduation to womanhood, with rituals and ceremonies inviting family and friends. In Andhra Pradesh, these rituals and celebrations involve the traditional rituals performed during religious festivals and marriage celebrations, such as ritual baths, prayers and gathering of friends and family.

Later monthly menstruation practices, dos and don'ts related to various Hinduisms, Hindu castes and Hindu tribes, are similar to those of other religions, as above. In general, during menstruation, women do not enter the temples; a well known, established and practiced religious etiquette. Brahmin women abstain from: cooking, touching food and pickles, and entering the kitchen and temples, sleeping in the day-time, bathing, wearing flowers, sex, touching others (male, female or children), and talking loudly. Certain temples do not allow women, menstruating or not.

As explained above a majority of cultures in the world have adapted measures to give privacy and space for menstruating women to prevent disease and infection. This is not a silly superstition, but a modern and practical solution, provided by [MENSTRUAL HYGIENE MATTERS](#) (funded by UK aid from the [Department of International Development \(DFID\)](#), to manage menstruation hygienically, for which it is essential that women and girls have access to water and sanitation. They need somewhere private to change sanitary cloths or pads; clean water for washing their hands and used cloths; and facilities for safely disposing of used materials or a place to dry them if reusable. There is also a need for both men and women to have a greater awareness of menstrual hygiene.

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However, in Modern India, these rules are not strictly followed due to the availability of modern sanitary and hygienic technology comprising tampons, pads, sanitary napkins etc. Many orthodox Brahmin families, especially the priestly families, still follow these rules, although they use the modern technology, including tampons, pads and other cosmetic and sanitary products and gadgets. Many Hindus (orthodox, unorthodox, secular or otherwise) understand that these rules were placed in practice for hygiene and health reasons, and when the modern sanitary technology for hygiene became available; they may relax some of these rules and may not follow strictly at home. However, about 54% of Hindus follow these rules with regard to temples out of respect for the ancient traditions and fellow strict followers of the tradition, according to a recent survey. However, 46% of Hindus actively flout the temple rules and etiquettes, most probably because temples are their rendezvous sites for non-religious social purposes, rather than religious worship and meditation. Many of these so-called Hindus are atheists and anti-Hindu, and actively desecrate Hindu temples and denounce Hindu temple practices.

Even in the most advanced Judeo-Christian American society, taboos, superstitions and ignorance exist due to lack of proper education, e.g., the popular American serial Orange is New Black depicts the ignorance of women regarding their own body parts such as vagina, labia, clitoris, and urinary opening, when Laverne Cox gives a lesson in female anatomy⁽¹⁰⁾.

As human societies advanced into the Internet age of information with modern medicine and technology available, it is possible to overcome the ignorance and shame associated with our bodies, fluids, excretions and functions; and hopefully, practice tolerance toward ancient cultures and show respect to the traditional practices of their fellow citizens.

In addition, practicing proper hygiene and taking care of bodily secretions is very important for each individual⁽¹¹⁾. The genitals are complex, life-giving organs with many functions. Knowledge is a key factor in developing a healthy attitude and understanding the normal functions of the genitalia helps a woman feel more comfortable with her body.

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Menstruation is a time of heightened risk of infection for women, including sexually transmitted infections. Today there are a number of ways including the use of sanitary napkins, tampons and menstrual cups to stay clean. Menstrual blood – once it has left the body – gets contaminated with the body’s innate organisms. This rule applies for even those days when you don’t have much bleeding, since your pad is still damp and will have organisms from your vagina, sweat from your genitals, etc. When these organisms remain in a warm and moist place for a long time they tend to multiply and can lead to conditions like urinary tract infection, vaginal infections and skin rashes. Therefore, it is important to realize that the sanitary rules and regulations laid down for the health and safety of the society are not demeaning to any individual, but to help a woman to stay healthy and avoid infections and diseases.

Unfortunately, many women and girls are unable to get hold of sanitary pads and struggle to dispose of them hygienically, which can affect their health. Using rags or unwashed cloths has been linked to reproductive tract infections, as well as secondary infertility, urinary tract infections and anemia. Menstrual hygiene matters is a resource for improving menstrual hygiene for women and girls in lower and middle-income countries⁽¹²⁾.

Best practices⁽¹³⁾ include washing regularly, avoiding tight clothing, using proper tampon or pads, changing sanitary products often and as needed, wiping from front to back to avoid infections, and practicing safe sex due to heightened risk of viral infections.

References and Notes:

(1) 1. Dr. Rao Vepachedu is the Managing Director at Cardinal Risk Management and registered patent attorney with extensive experience in the management of intellectual property and extensive experience in research and teaching. He currently works for Cardinal Intellectual Property (CIP), Cardinal Risk Management (CRM), and Cardinal Law Group (CLG). In addition, he is the president of Vepachedu Educational Foundation Inc. (www.vepachedu.org), a 501(c) (3) educational foundation. For more information visit: www.linkedin.com/in/vepachedu; <http://www.avvo.com/attorneys/60201-il-sreenivasarao-vepachedu-764535.html>, and <http://www.crm-ip.com/vepachedu.html>. Contact: svepachedu@yahoo.com or rao.vepachedu@cardinal-ip.com; www.linkedin.com/in/vepachedu and <http://www.crm-ip.com/vepachedu.html>;



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<http://www.avvo.com/profile/dashboard>.

(2) Menstruation And the Brain: <http://www.medicaldaily.com/menstruation-and-female-brain-how-fluctuating-hormone-levels-impact-cognitive-341788>

(2a) Emera et al., The evolution of menstruation: A new model for genetic assimilation: Explaining molecular origins of maternal responses to fetal invasiveness. Bioessays 34(1):26-35 (2011): Why do women menstruate? <http://freethoughtblogs.com/pharyngula/2011/12/21/why-do-women-menstruate/>

(3) My country's problem with menstruation: Anisha Bhavnani, is an 18-year-old Christian student in Mumbai, India. She is studying social sciences and humanities at St. Xavier's College. She visited a Hindu temple flouting the religious and cultural practices of the temple. She didn't understand why my entering a Hindu temple was such a big deal, and she was confused because she is a Christian and no concept of Hindu traditions and temple etiquette. With disgust, her mother indicated to Anisha that they (Christians and non-Hindus) did not believe in Hindu dumb superstitions and practices of Hindu temples. She says her teacher is not human being because she admonished Anisha for flouting the temple rules. Being a Christian, Anisha is shocked to learn about Hindu practices which are alien to her and she hates Hindu practices and calls "mindless" the Hindus who follow the Hindu traditions. She says Jesus loves all. However, she forgets that Jesus was a Jew and orthodox Jewish traditions are not different from the Hindu traditions. CNN has been promoting this propaganda: <http://www.cnn.com/2015/02/06/living/india-menstruation-irpt/>

(4) Menstruation, Religion and Society, International Journal of Social Science and Humanity, Vol. 3, No. 6, November 2013

(5) Leviticus 15:19-30:

19 "When a woman has a discharge, and the discharge in her body is blood, she shall be in her menstrual impurity for seven days, and whoever touches her shall be unclean until the evening.

20 And everything on which she lies during her menstrual impurity shall be unclean. Everything also on which she sits shall be unclean.

21 And whoever touches her bed shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening.

22 And whoever touches anything on which she sits shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening.

23 Whether it is the bed or anything on which she sits, when he touches it he shall be unclean until the evening.

24 And if any man lies with her and her menstrual impurity comes upon him, he shall be unclean seven days, and every bed on which he lies shall be unclean.

25 "If a woman has a discharge of blood for many days, not at the time of her menstrual impurity, or if she has a discharge beyond the time of her impurity, all the days of the discharge she shall continue in uncleanness. As in the days of her impurity, she shall be unclean.

26 Every bed on which she lies, all the days of her discharge, shall be to her as the bed of her impurity. And everything on which she sits shall be unclean, as in the uncleanness of her menstrual impurity.

27 And whoever touches these things shall be unclean, and shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening.

28 But if she is cleansed of her discharge, she shall count for herself seven days, and after that she shall be clean.

29 And on the eighth day she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons and bring them to the priest, to the entrance of the tent of meeting.

30 And the priest shall use one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering. And the priest shall make atonement for her before the Lord for her unclean discharge.

Leviticus 18:19: You shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness while she is in her menstrual uncleanness.

Leviticus 20:18: If a man lies with a woman during her menstrual period and uncovers her nakedness, he has made naked her fountain, and she has uncovered the fountain of her blood. Both of them shall be cut off from among their people.

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(6) What My Christian Fundamentalist Upbringing Taught Me About Periods: <http://feministing.com/2011/09/06/what-my-christian-fundamentalist-upbringing-tought-me-about-periods/>

Menstruation and the Bible: http://www.womeninthebible.net/Menstruating_woman_her_world.htm

(6a) A Brief History of Your Period: <http://valerietarico.com/2012/07/17/problem-periods-and-menstrual-management/>

(7) How do Islam and the Bible treat women who are having their menses? http://www.answering-christianity.com/women_menses.htm; <http://myperiodblog.com/2010/11/19/menstruation-and-religion/#j1tzAAWj070JfMh.99>

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Vulva Anatomy and Function: http://www.medicalook.com/human_anatomy/organs/Vulva.html

Self-Exam: Vulva and Vagina: <http://www.ourbodiesourselves.org/health-info/self-exam-vulva-vagina/>

<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/teens/my-body/female-anatomy-vulva-vagina-and-breasts>

How the female reproductive system works: <http://www.girlshealth.gov/body/reproductive/system.html>

The Guide to The Vagina: <http://www.afraidtoask.com/vulva/>

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(11) How to Maintain Feminine Hygiene:

<http://www.wikihow.com/Maintain-Feminine-Hygiene>

<http://www.everydayhealth.com/womens-health-pictures/hygiene-rules-for-a-healthy-vagina.aspx>

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<http://www.thehealthsite.com/sexual-health/tips-to-maintain-better-vaginal-hygiene/>

<http://www.faqs.org/health/Healthy-Living-V1/Personal-Care-and-Hygiene-Genital-care-for-females.html#ixzz3hmQCMJMb>

<http://rosaliegilbert.com/femininehygiene.html>

(12) Menstrual hygiene matters, A resource for improving menstrual hygiene around the world:

Nine modules and toolkits cover key aspects of menstrual hygiene in different settings, including communities, schools and emergencies. <http://www.wateraid.org/what-we-do/our-approach/research-and-publications/view-publication?id=02309d73-8e41-4d04-b2ef-6641f6616a4f>

(13) Tips for a Fresh and Healthy Period: <http://www.intimina.com/blog/tips-for-a-fresh-and-healthy-period/>

Today there are a number of ways including the use of sanitary napkins, tampons and menstrual cups to stay clean. In India, most unmarried girls prefer to use sanitary napkins. 10 menstrual hygiene tips every girl and woman should know:

<http://www.thehealthsite.com/diseases-conditions/hygiene-during-menstrual-periods-10-things-you-should-know/>

Hygiene during Your Daughter's Period: There is no harm in taking a bath while menstruating. Rather it is a wonderful and natural way to relax and ease cramps. A quick shower rinse before stepping out of the tub can take care of any concerns about blood leaking in the bath water. <http://www.kotex.com/na/articles-info/hygiene-during-your-daughters-period/20209>

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