



Commentary

Celebration of menarche : Welcoming womanhood in the indigenous ways

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Introduction

Menarche, the first menstrual bleeding, suddenly pushes a young girl into a new world of womanhood. This rapid developmental change and the sudden change of the self-concept affect adolescent girls (Ruble and Brooks-Gunn, 1982). The young minds struggle much to cope with this sudden change in their body and lifestyle, leading to stress and subsequent mental trauma (Paige and Paige, 1981; Marshall, 2016; Chandra-Mouli and Patel, 2017). These psychological changes are also evident in prepuberty, puberty, and post-puberty adolescent girls (Ruble and Brooks-Gunn, 1982; Marshall, 2016; Stenson et al., 2021). The sensitive period of puberty impacts trauma on girls' development of an anxiety disorder (primarily social phobia) and may even cause puberty or post-puberty depression or PTSD (Marshall, 2016). Though subjectively, menstruation is taught in all the high school

curricula, dealing with this transitional phase remains struggling among adolescent girls in low- and middle-income countries (Chandra-Mouli and Patel, 2017). The lack of knowledge, preparation, and guidance about menstruation, as observed in the low- and middle-income countries (Chandra-Mouli and Patel, 2017), pertains to the social taboo on discussing this natural physiological process and the communication gap within generations. To deal with these problems and to respond well to the requirements of adolescent girls during menstruation, Chandra-Mouli and Patel (2017) suggest education regarding puberty to all (both girls and boys), proper hygiene to be maintained during menstruation, availability of clean, functional toilets in schools and community, and mental support at the family and community level. They further suggest that the menstrual education and availability of pertinent facilities will enhance self-confidence and strengthen personal development among adolescent girls.

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Menarche and the cultural aspects

While this transitional point was initiated with ceremonies in the pre industrial cultural era, only a very few contemporary cultures are still holding this celebration (Jensen, 2015). In addition to the several tribal and minor communities in the world (Zuluaga

and Andersson, 2013), this occasion of menarche is celebrated through different ceremonies in the states of Southern and North-Eastern parts of India. These celebrations of Menarche rituals or the Ritu Kala Samskara ceremony are known as the Samurtha function in Andhra Pradesh, Manjal Neerattu Vizha in Tamilnadu, Arati in Karnataka, and Tuloni Biya in Assam (Joseph, 2020). Through these rituals, the knowledge regarding puberty and menstruation is conveyed to the newly menstruating girl, making the girl aware of the physical and psychological changes and providing appropriate traditional remedies and comfort her socially. Without formal documentation, these rituals are carried throughout generations (Joseph, 2020). In addition to that, the details and effects of these rituals are understudied mainly in menstrual research (Zuluaga and Andersson, 2013; Jensen, 2015; Pai et al., 2015; Joseph, 2020). The present paper provides an overview of the menarche rituals performed in the different parts of India.

The rituals: Performing menarche as an art

There is no fixed universal blueprint regarding the practices of these Menarche rituals, and they have been customized according to the regional climate, availability of food, and traditional medicines (Joseph, 2020). However, in all of these practices, the girl is given a separate clean room or even a newly made hut and plenty of nutritious and easily digestible foods (Joseph, 2020). In Karnataka, the girl is given sweets (laddu) made with a variety of dry fruits (dates, almonds, raisins, cashew, etc.) and ghee (clarified butter), and resin of babul (*Acacia*). The girl's hut comprises anti-bacterial neem (*Azadirachta indica*) leaves, coconut leaves, and mango leaves. In Tamil Nadu, a nutritious drink made from the raw egg yolk of country chicken and sesame oil/ghee is given to the girl, and similar huts are

constructed with palm/coconut leaves. In Andhra Pradesh, the girl is given dry coconut, ghee, khichdi with moong dal, milk, sesame laddu, jaggery, and plenty of water to drink, where raw fruits are given to the girl in Assam to consume. The family members comfort the girl and educate her with the necessary knowledge regarding menstrual hygiene and other different aspects of menstruation.

While in Karnataka, the Arati or waving of lighted lamps of the girl is carried out as the ritual's part, in Andhra Pradesh, the ceremony continues for 16 days as part of this ritual. In the first three days, she is made to rest, sit separately, and not allowed to touch anything, mainly to prevent her from coming into contact with any infectious agents (Joseph, 2020). For the first four days, in the evening, the girl is prepared with new cloth (sari) and other make-up for an arati performed by married women accompanied by traditional songs. On the fourth day, the girl is given a good bath where turmeric is applied to her body and a drink of water to prevent infection (Joseph, 2020), and she moves out of the seclusion room. After getting a 'Mangal snan' (auspicious bath) on the fifth day, the big celebration begins that continues to the 9th to 16th days. On these occasions, the girl sits on a chair, very well dressed with sari, bangles, ornaments, for a grand Arati to be performed. All the invitees give gifts to the girl. Though very close relatives bear the costs of these occasions, a grand celebration is organized by the girl's parents on the last day of this occasion. In the state of Assam, the menarche ritual is called Tuloni Biya, or the small wedding. This is similar to the celebration in other southern states with a few additions. A small marriage ceremony is performed with a banana tree, and all the marriage rituals are followed after the fourth day of her first day of the period. This event is celebrated for about seven days

with family, neighbors, and friends.

Adolescent rites are also performed among the Amazonian tribes involving several discrete activities. The girl spends the first three to five days in seclusion and on a strict diet under the supervision of a God-mother (*madrina*) and a mentor. Traditional herbal powders are applied to her body, and a hot spice mix is given to inhale. Traditional prayers and blessings accompany all these rituals.

Effects of the rituals

Many scholars describe ceremonies as the ways to express and reinforce social solidarity (Jensen, 2015). Jensen (2015) identified the adolescent initiation ceremonies as the imagistic ceremony (Atkinson and Whitehouse, 2011), which are infrequent, climactic rituals, and the ritual knowledge is created and transmitted through collective participation. The community rituals also indicate the importance of the event for the community (Jensen, 2015). The celebration of adolescent initiation suggests positive approaches of the community towards this transitional phase of young adults. Though adolescent initiation rituals are performed for boys and girls in many communities, this is becoming obsolete in the post industrial era (Pai and Pai, 1981; Jensen, 2015). In India, these rituals are survived in parts in menarche ceremonies for adolescent girls. These ceremonies are celebrated mainly to pamper the girl and support her in this new phase of life and for the post-puberty's health (Joseph, 2020).

Moreover, all the different forms of the menarche ceremonies involve social celebrations and gatherings of family and friends that are no lesser than the celebration of marriage. This provides mental support to the newly menstruating girl and helps her

cope with the social phobia observed in puberty and post-puberty adolescent girls.

Though the celebration of transition to womanhood is appreciated, the ritualistic seclusion and restrictions of these ceremonies are greatly criticized in popular articles. Understanding rituals' components and importance need to be studied with more attention and scientific observations. A study on the relationship of the adolescent initiation rituals and self-reported dysmenorrhea by women ($n=185$) of seven indigenous Amazonian communities reveals that the higher risk of dysmenorrhoea is reported by the women who had not completed the full initiation rites, compared to those who had completed all the rituals (Zuluaga and Andersson, 2013). Moreover, the women who did not meet the adolescent initiation rites reported increased severity of dysmenorrhea (Zuluaga and Andersson, 2013). However, although these kinds of studies have not been carried out in India, Pai et al. (2015) studied the effect of *Rajaswala Paricharya* (menstrual regime) on the menstrual cycle and its associated symptoms on 30 unmarried females and shows that these practices help relieve most of the menstrual cycle-related symptoms.

Conclusion

The celebration of menarche is the celebration of womanhood, which has been celebrated in India and other ancient cultures for ages. This shows the deep understanding of the necessity for transmitting the knowledge regarding menstruation and addressing this transitional phase with great care. These rituals bridge the gap of required knowledge and social communication, the lack of which is very much evident from recent studies. In addition to the physical well-being, the celebration of menarche ceremonies gives the girl happiness and

pleasant memories. Moreover, the positive impact of these adolescent initiation rites is already observed in other parts of the world (Amazonia). Therefore, more scientific studies should be conducted to understand the profound impact of these rituals in the Indian context.

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