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Prevalence of Menstrual Related Taboos in Special Context with Ayurvedic *Rajaswala*

***Paricharya* in Young Girls**

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ABSTRACT

Menstruation is a natural phenomenon, but it is also related with biology, psychology, society and religion for women. Menstruation is considered to be a mirror of reproductive health. The present day lifestyle and ideology towards launching female in society might have changed the traditional Indian culture of adopting the age old rituals. Tradition related to menstruation varies from ban of certain activities during cycle, to performance of certain rituals at the end of menstruation. Ayurveda, the age old science of life has mentioned certain do's and don'ts to be followed during menstruation under *Rajaswala paricharya*. Observance of certain rules is followed by all cultures all over the world, yet there is prevalence of certain menstrual taboos. This topic is often neglected or least discussed amongst all healthy practices. In the present study literary research was done on *Rajaswala paricharya* from classical text of Ayurveda and from modern texts for understanding the scientific basis of menstrual restrictions. A cross sectional survey study performed in the form of pilot study on 798 girls with a pre-designed questionnaire after taking consent. In a gross conclusion, maximum (n=712) 89.22% of girls were following the restriction related to religious activities, whereas only 14.16% (n=113) avoided cooking during menstruation. There are many evidences supporting the regime mentioned in our classics to be observed during menstruation and it should be the aim of the learners of Ayurveda to bring

back the tradition and culture lost with the ages. To come on more firm conclusion a large scale study can be planned keeping into an Ayurvedic perspective for Indian population.

Key words: *Rajaswala Paricharya*, Menstrual taboos, Menotoxin, Pheromones.

Introduction

A woman undergoes drastic physical, psychological and emotional changes throughout her life time. Menstruation is one the important milestone in her life remarking the power of reproduction. An average women menstruate almost quarter of her fertile life. There are many cultures and traditions associated with menstruation. Since time ages a menstruating female is considered to be impure and unclean and not only in Hinduism, but Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism all hold beliefs regarding menstruation.^[8] The striking similarity amongst these religions is consistent themes including isolation, exclusion from religious services, and restraint from sexual intercourse.

Ayurveda, the invaluable system of medicine, helps women in journey towards better health throughout different phases of life and add quality to her life. This is accomplished with *Paricharyas* – modes of life to be performed during the different phases like Menstruation (*Rajaswala*), Fertile period (*Rutukal*), Pregnancy (*Garbhini*), Postpartum (*Sutika*)s. As because of drastic physical and psychic changes during these periods, she has affinity towards various diseases. Following these modes of life, women respond to the changes in her body healthily.

Aims and Objectives:

1. To study the prevalence to adopt traditional rituals during menstrual cycle.
2. To explore the menstrual taboos practiced since ages worldwide.

3. To study the scientific basis of *Rajaswala Paricharya* mentioned in Ayurveda.
4. To understand the myths and facts about menstruation practices.

Materials and Methods:

Literary research on *Rajaswala paricharya* and menstrual taboos was done.

A cross sectional survey was conducted to assess the observance of restrictions during menstruation among young girls of rural and urban areas.

Inclusion criteria: Girls of rural and urban areas within the age group of 16 to 21 years

Exclusion criteria: Girls unwilling to participate in the survey.

Rajaswala paricharya

Menstruating female is termed as *Rajaswala*. Ayurveda too describes disciplined life to be observed by her for the first three days of menstrual cycle. Along with the regimen to be followed by the *Rajaswala*, the couple should observe celibacy as ill effects of non observance are shown on offspring which will be conceived by the female who is not following the regimen. [Table I] The ultimate aim of all *Acharyas* while mentioning all *Paricharyas* was attaining a healthy progeny with maintaining the health of female during antenatal and postnatal period.^[1,2,3]

Table I : Do's and Don'ts of *Rajaswala Paricharya*

| Sr. No | Do's during menstruation | Don'ts during menstruation | Abnormalities in child on non observance of rules |
|--------|---|--|---|
| 1 | To observe celibacy during first three days of menstruation | Sleeping during day time... <i>diva swapna</i> | Over sleepy |
| | | Use of collyrium (<i>Anjana</i>) | Blind |
| | | Weeping / Crying... <i>rodana</i> | Visual disturbances |
| 2 | Sleep on <i>Darbha</i> mattress | Bathing and anointment | Miserable |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | (<i>Lepana</i>) | |
| | | Massage (<i>Abhyanga</i>) | <i>Kustha</i> (skin disease) and other skin disorders |
| 3 | Should eat meal made of ghee <i>Shali</i> rice and milk or meal made of barley | Nail pairing... <i>nakha kartana</i> | Deformity in nails |
| | | Chasing / Running... <i>dhavana</i> | Reckless, indecisive |
| 4 | To eat food directly taking over palm or in clay utensil, leaves | Laughing | Discoloration (black) of teeth, lips and tongue |
| | | Indulging in long conversations | Over talkative |
| 5 | To take food in less quantity | Listening to various topics | Deaf |
| | | Combing | Bald |
| 6 | Concentrate on auspicious things | Nasal instillation of medicine (<i>Nasya</i>) | Menstrual abnormalities (female child) |
| | | Exposure to wind | Insanity... <i>unmada</i> |

Intercourse performed on first day of menstruation will not cause pregnancy or if conceived will suffer from intra uterine death or will die immediately after delivery. On second day of menstruation, conceived foetus will face abortion or intrauterine death or death within few days after delivery and on third day, the conceived child will suffer from defective body parts or less longevity and with other deficiencies^[4,5,6]

Even while mentioning the selection of partner and contraindicated conditions while performing coitus, *Acharyas* have prohibited coitus in a *Rajaswala* i.e. during menstruation.

Menstrual taboos

Taboo is derived from Polynesian language, in which the word is a combination of the word *ta* which means 'to mark,' with the word *bu* which is simply an adjective of intensity. 'Tapua' the root of the word 'taboo' in Polynesian has two meanings – Sacred and menstruation. Besides, taboo also means forbidden, prohibited, disallowed wonderful, magic, terrible, frightening and immutable law. Taboo does not result in formal punishment if it is broken. People believe that a taboo must be followed or it will result in harm to the person as well as its community.^[7]

Taboos may serve many functions and often remain in effect after their original reason has disappeared. The rise of rationalism and science has reduced the potency of many former taboos in modern cultures.

Menstrual taboos in culture and religions across the globe^[8]

1. Isolation of menstruating women in special designed huts outside village is practiced today also in some villages of south India today also. This seclusion ranges from 3 to 7 days (special sacred reed hut termed as 'Giparu')
2. In Hindu families menstruating female is kept separate form household, not allowed to perform domestic duties, restricted from touching anything, sit in separate areas during religious festivals. Going to temple or worshipping an intercourse is restricted during menstruation.
3. Other taboos in Hinduism are resting, cannot comb hair or bathe. Not allowed to use water springs for personal hygiene. Not to cook and must keep separate utensils. Women must not mount on horse, ox or elephant nor may they drive a vehicle.
4. Cultural taboos include avoiding sour foods for fear of smelly period, fish and meat are restricted and not touching certain food items like pickles' to prevent contamination and the general belief that menstruation dispels toxic blood.
5. In Jewish culture taboos include playing sports together, directly handling or receiving objects and eating together in the same plate.
6. Menstruating Muslim women in most conservative families are restricted from praying, touching the Quran, fasting during Ramzan. Ritual washing after menstruation to become clean again.
7. In Buddhism menstruating women cannot meditate nor do they have contact with priest.

8. In ancient literature *Manusmriti* states that "The wisdom, the energy, the strength, the might, and the vitality of a man who approaches a woman who has menstrual excretions, utterly perish".
9. In Western cultures, in attempts to avoid letting other people know they are menstruating, many women avoid participating in activities such as sports and sexual intercourse. In addition, these women may avoid other activities such as concerts, camping, picnics, or any other activity that may limit their access to a bathroom for fear of leaking and letting out their 'secret'.
10. In England some believe that the milk handled by a woman during her menses cannot be churned to butter; that hams will not take salt at her hands. Many of the primitives believe that the evil spirit may get into menstruating women in the form of a snake, lizard or bird.
11. In South Africa, the kaffirs think that if these women drink milk, the cow will die. In rural India, they must be purified before being allowed to milk cows. In south India however they do not think they can make these women pure enough to milk cows, so they let the men do it.
12. Pliny says that if a menstruating woman sits under a tree, the fruit will tumble down and all plants will turn yellow if she comes near them. In Galela menstruating women are not allowed to enter the tobacco field. In Sumatra, they must keep away from the rice fields. In Saigon, if such a woman works on opium, it will turn bitter. In central Australia they are not allowed to gather bulbs which are their foodstuff.
13. In north of France, menstruating women are not permitted to enter into the sugar factories as they will spoil the boiling sugar. In Syria, they must keep away from salting or pickling.
14. The ancient Jews protected themselves in many ways from a menstruating woman. Whatever they touched had to be burned. Men were not permitted to uncover her nakedness. A menstruating woman could not go to church, or touch anything sacred. Her husband was not permitted to hand her anything. At the end of menstruation, she was bathed by two women in a special cleansing basin. On the seventh day, she cut her nails, combed her hair and was immersed three times. She put on fresh linen. After this, her husband was allowed to become intimate.

Evidences showing presence of Menotoxin and Pheromones:

A toxic substance with specific pharmacological and chemical reactions called 'Menotoxins' believed to be secreted in blood serum, blood corpuscles, saliva, sweat, milk and other secretions of menstruating women is under research since 1920s. Researches on menstrual blood shows that menotoxin has phytotoxic property by inhibiting growth of roots and stems and has distorting influence on geotropic properties of seedlings. Chemically these menotoxins exhibited properties near to oxy-cholestrin which causes prolongation of blood coagulation. In other work it was suggested that Necrosin has properties identical to menstrual discharge. Necrosin is a toxic substance (inflammatory exudates) that induces leucopenia. Menotoxin is also reported to be responsible for dysmenorrhoea, eclampsia and Pre Menstrual Syndrome^[9,10,11]

During various studies on menstrual synchronization done in dormitory, a possible existence of volatile compound 'Pheromone' was revealed with its possible mechanism on manipulation of menstrual cycle. This odourless compound derived from axilla of menstruating women may shorten or lengthen menstrual cycle of recipient women in follicular or ovulatory phase respectively.^[12,13,14] Many studies conducted later to support this event failed to report menstrual synchrony and reported faults in statistical analysis and faults in research of McClintock^[15] Menstrual synchrony is reported in some events in women staying together (work place or in family).^[16]

Physical activity and Menstruation:

Vigorous exercise in the form of athletic training may delay menarche. The reasons for apparent effects of exercise on menstrual cycles are loss of body fat (resulting in estrogen deficit), overall weight loss, dietary factors (especially low percentage of calories from protein and less dietary cholesterol which is building block of estrogen) emotional stress and exercise triggered release of endorphin (natural sedative akin to morphine). Late complication of amenorrhoea is premature bone loss. Hence excessive exercise have clinical effects such as absence of menstruation, osteoporosis, irregular menstruation, inter menstrual bleeding, abnormal growth of uterine lining or infertility. The nature and severity of the symptoms seen are dependent on number of variables such as specific type of exercise, intensity and duration.^[17,18]

Ayurveda describes the role of *Apana vayu* for the normal function of menstruation and any physical activity done during menstruation may hamper this function and lead to imbalance in the cycle.

Survey Study – The cross sectional survey of young girls of urban and rural areas was conducted at Vidyanagar and New Vallabh Vidyanagar of Anand district.

Observation & Results:

In the questionnaire regarding restrictions observed during menstruation all 798 girls responded by marking one or more restrictions they were following during first three five days of menstruation. [Table 2] N is the number of girls responded to the question. The variation in N is because certain girls left the question unanswered. Hence the statistical data is measured only amongst the girls who answered the particular question.

Table 2: Menstrual practices

| Menstrual restriction practices | N =798 (Number of girls) | % |
|--|--------------------------------------|----------|
| Restriction from Cooking | 113 | 14.16 |
| Touching others | 87 | 10.90 |
| Religious activity | 332 | 41.60 |
| Visiting temple | 380 | 47.62 |
| Sleeping in same bed | 47 | 5.89 |
| Touching plants | 58 | 7.27 |
| Touching pickels | 49 | 6.14 |
| Application of turmeric, kajal | 19 | 2.38 |
| Touching flowers | 8 | 1.00 |

| | | |
|---------------------|----|------|
| Visiting neighbours | 8 | 1.00 |
| No restrictions | 25 | 3.13 |

Table 2 reveals that only 3.13% of girls did not follow any restrictions during menstruation. Religious activity (41.60%) and visiting temple (47.62%) was restricted most girls. Whereas factors inducing isolation like sleeping somewhere else, visiting others was followed minimum.

Table 3: Reasons for following restrictions

| Reasons for following restrictions | N= 676 | % |
|-------------------------------------|--------|-------|
| Culture | 267 | 39.50 |
| Religion | 301 | 44.53 |
| Scared to be punished | 10 | 1.48 |
| Something bad will happen to family | 33 | 4.88 |
| Others | 65 | 9.62 |

N = number of respondents

Table 3 shows the fact that the reason for observance of the rules was mentioned as religion (44.53%) and culture (39.50%) by majority of girls. Fear of punishment to them and family members because of misconduct was seen in few.

Table 4: Reasons to disagree

| Why disagree to follow restrictions every time | N= 583 | % |
|---|--------|-------|
| New culture | 144 | 24.70 |
| Not possible to follow restrictions in present time | 223 | 38.25 |

| | | |
|---|-----|-------|
| Are allowed to perform routine activities | 123 | 21.10 |
| Others | 93 | 15.95 |

Table 4 reveals that the girls when asked why they want to disagree for following such restrictions, 38.25% believed that it was not possible to follow the rules in present time as they were collegians. 24.70% believed that it is an old culture and new culture does not follow such rules. 21.10% were allowed to continue normal routine without any restrictions.

Table 5: Breaking rules of restrictions

| Tried to break restrictions | N= 684 | % |
|------------------------------------|---------------|----------|
| Yes | 257 | 37.57 |
| No | 427 | 62.43 |

Table 5 shows that maximum girls (62.43%) agreed that they have tried to break these rules of restrictions many times.

Table 6: Female members of family following restrictions

| Who in the family follows restrictions | N= 760 | % |
|---|---------------|----------|
| Grandmother | 212 | 27.89 |
| Mother | 418 | 55.00 |
| Sister | 51 | 6.71 |
| Others | 79 | 10.39 |

When inquired about the female family members observing such rules, 55% girls revealed that their mother and 27.89% mentioned grandmother as follower of such restrictions. [Table 6]

Discussion

21st Century has looked into major changes into the society in which women are empowered with similar status as of male in the so called male dominant society. Also the role of female has shifted from just being a source of reproduction and house hold work to an earning individual of the family. The families have shifted from group family to nuclear family where the burden of household, career, job, children and others is seen majorly on the female member of the family.

Because of these reasons there has been a change in the observation of menstrual taboos or restrictions to be followed during menstruation practiced in families since ages. The female has to cook, do the household work, go for job and do all the activities from which she was restricted as per culture and tradition.

Reviewing all the literature related to *Rajaswala paricharya* and menstrual taboos, it seems that major restrictions are directed towards isolation, less physical exertion and celibacy. Though there are still biases in different religions against women, there is a strong need to analyze the origin behind the restrictions and the faith behind them. The reasons behind observance of these restrictions in culture and tradition were that they were not considered clean and hygienic enough. Some still believe that the main reason is to maintain and unequal status quo between men and women. The roles of menotoxin and pheromones of menstruating female on others have been under research since decades but there are no established facts on the same studies. Part of the educated society even believes that some taboos or restrictions are illogical but they do not have the power to refuse them particularly in relation to visiting temple. The taboos have implications on women physically, emotionally and socially when she is eliminated from participating in some social activities. The repercussions of non observance of *Rajaswala Paricharya* on offspring need to be studied and researched. Isolation and avoidance of physical strain was the main aim of restrictions mentioned in Ayurveda. Current study revealed that observance of restrictions is limited majorly to religious activities.

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