

## “Menstrupedia: Aditi Gupta’s Step Towards Breaking the Menstruation Taboo”

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### ABSTRACT

Women today, are at the forefront of many fields. They are paving new pathways for younger generations and also proving to be fabulous role models. According to the Sixth Economic Census, released by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, women constitute around 14% of the total entrepreneurship. But there have been traditional cultural constructions of female body and the meaning of menstruation within Indian symbolic systems and these meanings have undoubtedly shaped Indian women's experiences of female bodily processes and also the perception of both men and women regarding the female bodily processes. Anyways every woman as she starts menstruating is suddenly introduced to certain rules like not visiting a temple, not touching pickle, not performing Pooja or rituals, etc. This is questioned by women at first but then it becomes the part of the consciousness and women have to accept it as part of her life and she suddenly becomes impure for a certain time-period every month. These things are followed in belief as well as practise. There needs to be a way charted out to make them understand that there are scientific reasons for them to rest during the period and then leave them with the personal choice of following what or what not. Women as social entrepreneur have been working towards bringing social changes. One such inspiring women entrepreneur is Aditi Gupta, who has started a business that has revolutionised the lives of countless young women. The primary purpose of the paper is to study the journey of a young women trying to revolutionize the mind-set of people by touching upon the issue of menstruation, which is considered a taboo in India and the challenges faced by her.

### Keywords:

Menstruation, Taboo, Stigma, Sustainable Development Goal (Goal-3), Menstrupedia.

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### INTRODUCTION

Menstruation is a natural biological process. But the shame, stigma and misconception associated with it prevails across different parts of the world even today. Significance of menstruation varies substantially among different cultures and religious beliefs. Anne Frank in her book “Diary of a young girl” calls it as “Sweet Secret.” It is a natural process but there have been cultural constructions of the meaning of menstruation within Indian symbolic systems. Religious taboos and cultural norms on menstruation are often compounded by traditional associations with evil spirits, shame and embarrassment surrounding sexual reproduction. When a woman starts menstruating, she is

suddenly introduced to certain rules-like not visiting a temple, not touching the pickle, not performing Pooja or rituals, etc. Common period taboo includes the idea that women are impure, dirty, or sinful while they are menstruating. Some women are discouraged from touching or washing their genitals during their periods to eliminate the possibility that they might contaminate the water of a communal bathing area. But in parts of South India, the first menstrual cycle is seen as a boon. Girls are adorned in new clothes are given gifts and money. Aboriginal Australians ritually bathe and apply beautiful body paint to young women on the outset of their menstrual cycle. Mossi tribe of western Africa take time off from both work and family for the length of their cycle. Another

tribe of West Africa, Dagara believe menstruating women possess heightened wisdom and the power to heal – these are exceptions.

### **MENSTRUAL TABOOS**

The menstrual ritual which are now seen as menstrual taboos is not to suppress women in “that time of the month.” But research says that earlier women were not seen as impure. Women generally do not see the scientific outlook to it but rather believe in the age-old belief system that they want to be keepers of. These beliefs arose from ancient Indian science which also includes Ayurveda, yoga, meditation, mantra and Astrology. Throughout the history, menstrual bleeding has been seen as a supernatural event. The feeling that all blood, including the menstrual flow, carried some basic life principle led to the prevalent belief that contact with menstruating women or menstrual blood could have serious consequences – both evil and beneficial. The majority of these special powers, however, were evil. In the early times, menstruation was believed to render a woman periodically dangerous and varied social restrictions were created to limit her contact with her husband and with members of her community. In the attempt to explain the origin of taboos associated with it vary examining the collective psychology of the people while others accept it as a common feature of social structure that is shared by societies.

### **THEORETICAL EXPLANATION**

Sociologists consider male solidarity to be one developmental aspect of general social “rigidity” that is, the lack of intercommunication between groups within the society. The complexity of attitudes and feelings held by men with regard to female sexual processes is believed to influence the structural features determining them. It is important to understand religion and patriarchy. Consistent with patriarchal inheritance, the sacred texts set forth harsh penalties for adultery and other behaviours that lower the husband’s

probability of paternity. The scriptures also place greater emphasis on female than on the male chastity, including the requirement of modest attire for women and the idealisation of virginity for unmarried females in fact religions more strongly regulate female sexuality. Even the menstrual huts help to assure paternity

In various cultures all over the world, menstruation is related with “puberty rites”, including in some parts of India and the rite of passage at menarche is celebrated publically and the scale and elaborateness of the celebration is determined by the family’s financial situation. Although it is natural physiological process, it is perceived to be associated with much morbidity and issues like menorrhagia, dysmenorrhoea and oligomenorrhoea are listed as frequent illnesses by women. Attaining physical maturity and the meanings attached to this affect a young girls’ sexuality, her status and reproductive status in the society and consequently her overall health status. As a phenomena happening only to girls, menstruation is correlated with female sexuality and its onset is defined by restrictions on behaviour that instil a sense of shame in young women and negatively influence self-image. There is long history of viewing menstruation as unclean, and as a result, feelings of shame and unease among women in relation to the natural workings of their bodies. Almost universally, menstrual blood and sexual fluids have been regarded as pollutants which threaten the well-being of the community.

According to Nasaruddin Umar, in the past, Jewish men kept away from Jewish women during their menstruation cycle since menstruating women were considered unclean and could bring disaster to those they came into contact with them. Therefore, menstrual huts were created for seclusion during the bleeding period (Grahn, 1993). The tradition of wearing veil a further developed other traditions such as eye shadow, necklace, earrings, and cosmetic. These menstrual customs served the purpose of warning others that

women were menstruating, and they were to be avoided (Grahn, 1993, p. 75). Aristotle argues that the bestower of the soul of the embryo is the man because of the soul comes from man. Blood from menstruation only provides nutrition for the embryo, thus women were seen as having blemishes.

Beauvoir's work in "The Second Sex" has historically pinned women's reproductive biology against them as religious, medical, and economic discourses have been exercised to socially subjugate and inscribe the menstrual body with symbolic cultural "text". These cultural inscriptions mark the female body as a site of reproduction, not only for the material continuity of the human race, but also for the more intangible proliferation of societal norms and values. Girls are given special instruction in femininity maintenance at the onset of puberty which stipulates female docility through bodily subordination. The dichotomous division of 'Self' and 'Other' is anchored in a socially constructed binary which joins, through opposition, two categories such as male/female, mind/body, rational/irrational, essential/inessential with attributes belonging to male being privileged at the expense of assigned female traits. The gender binary system operates inconspicuously by giving masculine and feminine attributes an appearance of essentialized naturalization which makes gender seem innate rather than being a product of socialization. Woman is thus defined through her biology which confines her to the condition of body, as an inessential object, as 'Other'. She argued that in patriarchal society, woman's social positioning as 'Other' does not allow for woman to claim title to authentic subject as the socially contrived dualism of the gender binary defines and tethers woman to a fixed, feminine essence. And so when women want to go away with it due to their humaneness, the conflict appears. Thus, woman's destiny is not biologically determined, but instead her body, as a material situation, is imbued and inscribed with social meaning which

makes becoming 'Other' "in a cultural context in which one is not, really, free to become much of anything else," nearly inevitable. Yet menstruation in and of itself does not make woman 'Other', but instead the menstrual cycle is denigrated as it is linked to the inferior female identity because "femininity signifies alterity and inferiority that its manifestation is met with shame."

Gloria Steinem in 1982 made a point in her satirical piece that "If Men Could Menstruate." Steinem argued that because men construct the binary they hold power to lay claim and name that which is deemed good and normal in the social world. Therefore, if men could "men-struate", their bleeding bodies would represent a "boast worthy, masculine event" due to their privileged social standing.

Sociologist Erving Goffman's *stigma-theory* suggests there are three categories of stigmatization; "abominations of the body" resulting from physical scarring and deformities, "blemishes of individual character", such as mental illness or prostitution, and "tribal stigmas" which are stigmas related to identity and are attributed to marginalized groups based on characteristics, that include but are not limited to, gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. An invisible stigma creates a social environment in which the mark is not immediately discernible but has the potential to discredit the individual. According to feminist psychologists, Robin Kowalski and Tracy Chapple (2000), when others are aware of a discredited person's spoiled identity, the stigmatized may attempt to compensate in some other area or try and "save face" by becoming hyper-motivated to repair the damage to her image. Menstruation so, can also come under the stigmatised category. First, through the cultural belief that menstrual blood is a repugnant bodily fluid, menstruation discredits the female body by marking women as stigmatized, so menstruation is seen as "bodily abomination". Many women perform ritualistic

hygiene procedures in order to cleanse and deodorize their bodies in an attempt to keep their menstrual status hidden. The stigma of menstruation further mirrors Goffman's definition of individual character blemishes. There are two ways for menstruation to blemish the female image; first, through menstrual leakage onto clothing which conveys a very visible stain on a woman's character; and second through mental and physical illness that results from pre-menstrual and menstrual phases of a women's cycle. Lastly, Goffman's concept of tribal identity further helps to explain menstruation as a social stigma, as women's menses are culturally viewed as evidence of the identity trait of "femaleness". But one research by Chapple and Kowalski also suggests that when women perceive that others are unaware that they are menstruating, a higher rate of motivation and confidence in self-presentation is found.

In Foucault's most notable works, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* ([1977] 1995) and *The History of Sexuality: Volume I* ([1978]1990), he argues that the scientific and medical discourses which emerged in modernity entailed subtle forms of social control and surveillance. Foucault's work centres on the ways in which these less visible forms of power and discipline came to be inscribed on social bodies in modernity. Foucault termed this policing of body movements by superiors, "mechanics of power," "micro-physics of power," and "biopower," which he believed came to be internalized by subjects, through ritualistic practice, and resulted in self-regulated discipline. Foucault's theory of discourse as power can be applied to menstrual bodies and the internalization process pubescent girls experience when they enter menarche which can be called an internalised menstrual panopticon.

### INDIAN TABOOS LINKED TO MENSTRUATION

These menstrual taboos have their roots in hygiene. Since, women in older times did not have

sanitary napkins and used a cotton cloth which they would use again and again. They were not allowed to enter the kitchen because they were not considered clean and hygienic enough to cook for the other members of the family. But nowadays, women care less about hygiene. Thus, hygiene is not the only reason surrounding this taboo but rather, it is maintained to keep an unequal status quo between men and women. Some women have to sleep on a bare bed without any mattress or bed sheet. This is parallel to what is written in the book of 'Vyasa'. In this book, menstruating women only can lie on the ground, eat once at night, and they are not able to speak or move. Grahm also argued, "Menstrual seclusion rites as recorded over the last few centuries typically include three basic taboos: the menstruating women must not see light, she must not touch water, and she must not touch earth. There are many other taboos. According to Kapoor and Puri, in some areas in India, attending to a visitor is banned for menstruating women. Some Hindu women are not permitted to wear new clothes or look at themselves in the mirror. They are not allowed to go to the house of priest. Hindu women in rural areas face more restrictive practices than Hindu women in Urban India.

The main taboo for Hindu women during menstruating is that they cannot worship. The rational to this taboo is that menstruating women are passing out the dirty blood from their body, so they avoid going to temple during the menstruation. And most of the women feel guilty when they have to prepare offerings for certain ceremonial events. Everything that is connecting with the temple is prohibited for menstruating women. Breaking these taboos results in many consequences and most women might not want to hold these taboos or not believe in these taboos but mostly they do not have the power to refuse these. Menstrual taboos, in fact, are purposed to keep women under a male system of dominance. Feeling guilty is the main stopper for women.

When women feel guilty they do not have power. As a result, women are under male control.

Lynn Teskey Denton in her book, 'Female Ascetics in Hinduism', stated that menstruation is an indication that women are impure and sinful, so they have no ordinary inclination to dharma (prayer). This forbiddance has major effects for women. First, since a menstruating woman is banned to do dharma, she is associated to the lowest cast as these are not able to do dharma. So this association or situation avoids women's rights in asceticism. Second, without dharma, a menstruating woman is always dependent on others because she has to always be remained in duties. In her case, her male relatives have authority to be remainders. Thus women can never be independent as they are always under the power of theirs. The prohibition on cooking and taking water is created so that menstruating women must always depend on others. Third, a woman in "Amantravat" (without Mantra) cannot be allowed to conduct religious duties. The implications of Amantravat place women in a weak position. If women do not take part in the religious event, she is assumed to be less pious or spiritual, and not have any bargaining position in society. According to Chaturvedi, because of menstruation, women cannot become priests. She said, could you imagine a priest menstruating during worship?" Similar to Chaturvedi, some Islamic male scholars also believe that no women can become a Prophet because women need to stop worshipping when they are menstruating. This perception is based on one had it that women are less religious because they cannot worship all the time. Even though this debatable in terms of quality and originality, some often recite this only.

Schaefer (1992) argued that there is a basic hierarchical structure in our culture: God, men, women, children, animal and earth. God is the upper hierarchy. Men are under god, and women, children, animal and earth are under the control of men. One always tries to switch to the upper rank. For instance, men want to be like god, and women

want to be like men. Because women are one rank beneath men, women are not able to avoid menstrual taboos. At the same time, men perform like god, so they want to maintain control over everything, including menstruating women.

Menstrual taboos in Hinduism exist in castes: Brahman, Kshatriya and Shudra. However, women from upper castes are more restricted. For instance, the number of menstrual taboos for women in Brahmana caste is more complicated than for women in Shudra caste. The main menstrual taboo prevalent in all castes and countries is the prohibition on attending a place of worship and preparing religious rituals. Menstrual taboos in Hinduism have implications for women. The effects of menstrual taboos are not only physical but also psychological. Due to menstrual taboos, the chances for women to be active socially are limited since menstruating women in Hinduism are not able to work outside home during the menstrual period. Overall, menstrual taboos put women in a second position to that of men.

## MOON CYCLE AND OTHER NON-RELIGIOUS EXPLANATIONS

Many have heard that there is connection between moon cycles and woman's menstruation. It does not seem true today or may be because of the lesser regard for nature today that we tend to miss the connection between the two. But the research has shown some effects of moonlight on menstruation which is regarding the exposure of moon's light while sleeping during menstruation which is studied as night lighting. And many have noted the correlation between the lunar phases (twenty eight days for a full lunar month) and the average length of the menstrual cycle (twenty eight days). Even the ancient Hindus considered menstruation to be an evidence that a woman was peculiarly under the influence of the moon as a Vedic text reads as, "The blood of the woman is a form of Agni and therefore, no one should despise it." Menstruation here is connected with fire, for



Agni is the fire-God and is closely related to the light of the moon. But in this context, menstrual blood is definitely cited as sacred because it is a "manifestation of him."

Maya Tiwari in her book *Women's power to Heal: through Inner medicine*. She says that it is due to the cosmic energy of food that travels up, while energy with menstrual blood is that of going downwards and so these two powerful sadhnas do not go hand in hand. Plants energy is linked to nourishing of body but menstrual blood energy is of cleansing one, so it is unwise to mix the energies. Sex is considered taboo too as it is believed that women absorb men's energy too, when women is supposed to be releasing their own energies alone, and when the partner is having negative energy, so women's natural energy flow is affected. And when women are told to not take bath or wash hair, it is due to the psycho energetic level and it is to safeguard body against the persuasive rhythm of water element. Water is supposed to bless, cure, heal, nourish, nurture and revive but due to its own cosmic memory, it can influence the flow of menstrual cycle to its own strong beat.

In Jharkhand finding the menstrual cloth has been considered an excuse to kill single women in the name of witches to take away their property. So taboos relating to menstrual women have been proving to be deadly for some too. It is believed that as earth needs rest with time, similarly women who are menstruating should also not be disturbed during period and her natural cleansing and downward flow of energy should be allowed, before her next fertile phase begins. Thus, the cultures saw a close connect with the cyclical nature of earth and women's cycles. The temple of Bhagwathi in Chengannur, Kerala and the temple of Kamakhya Devi, Assam where Goddess is believed to menstruate is symbolic of the fact that release of energy should not be interrupted in any way.

Even today in Kamkhaya temple in Assam and in parts of Orissa, the rituals of the

menstruation of goddess are celebrated during the monsoon season. Both the fertile land and woman must rest, be venerated and celebrated. N.N. Bhattacharya notes the auspiciousness of menstruation, representing potential fertility, is symbolised by blood or the colour of blood and is regarded as sacred, for example, the colour of Sindoor which is red, also symbolize the sacredness of her potential fertility. Even as a part of idol worship, red colour is used most. He believes that these ancient religious ideas and symbols are definitely linked to blood of menstruation. Veena Das talks about the regularity of menstruation and season as linked, as the 'Rtu' is used for both and thus gives the cultural meaning to menstruation within Hindu culture as it is linked to both regularity of nature as well as menstrual cycle of women as the regularity of latter leads to regularity of former. Similarly, menstrual cycle and moon's cycle is linked too, showing that rhythms of body and rhythms of cosmos are in harmony.

### CASE STUDY

"Breaking a taboo" is usually considered objectionable by society in general, A majority of girls in India undergo the struggle of shame and taboo associated with menstruation. It is a tough time for them when they are trying to figure themselves out as individuals while being subjected to various standards and objectifications of the society. It is for this reason that Aditi's work has been so successful in shaping so many lives. One of the important takeaways from Aditi's story is the ambition to not just make money but to make lives better as well. This is what social entrepreneurship is. Social entrepreneurship involves finding solutions to various social and cultural problems. This kind of a positive change is very integral in today's society.

Aditi Gupta was born in Garhwa, Jharkhand, India. The idea for her company sprung up in Aditi's mind at a very early age.

When Aditi was 12 years old, she got her period. At first she had no idea what was happening as she has not been exposed to the phenomenon of menstruation yet. She ran to her mother to try and understand what was happening to her. Aditi officially learnt about menstruation only when she was 15 years old. Aditi's family was old school, which she realised when she got her period. They had various customs which she did not find relevant. She had to sleep in a separate room, wash her clothes separately and was not allowed to touch a place of worship. In addition to this, she was also not allowed to purchase sanitary pads for the fear of the loss of her family's dignity. Instead, she had to use old cloths as sanitary pads. She was appalled and upset with the lack of awareness and conversation around this crucial topic that impacted every girl at some point. This experience was the catalyst that led to the idea of her company Menstrupedia. Aditi studied at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad where she met her future husband, with whom she worked on several projects. Both of them found a severe lack of awareness about menstruation even among educated people and thus they decided to start a company.

### THE GROWTH OF MENSTRUPEDIA

Aditi Gupta did her research for one year to understand the lack of awareness and education around this topic. She spoke to doctors and girls which helped her collate information. This helped her start a comic book with three young girls and doctors as the titular characters. She put up these comics on a website which eventually developed into a helpful platform that provided information on puberty and sexuality for teens and pre-teens. Menstrupedia is a website that puts out a user friendly guide to menstruation, puberty and health. It also busts several myths that are commonly believed about menstruation. The sole purpose of this website was to be a culturally sensitive and easy to understand method of

understanding a taboo topic. The website contains a lot of sections such as comic books, blogs, Q&A section and a Learn section. This comic has been integrated into the curriculum of over 70 schools across India, used by 6000 schools, 12 NGOs such as Protsahan, Munshi Jagannath Bhagwan Smriti Sansthan, Instincts, Kanha along with two Buddhists monasteries in Ladakh and 2,50,000 girls. It is able to disseminate knowledge in 18 different countries and has been translated into over 11 languages. Menstrupedia has started several campaigns in collaboration with Whisper India such as Touch the Pickle movement in collaboration with many actresses like Shraddha Kapoor, Parineeti Chopra, Kalki Koechlin, Neha Dhupia, and Mandira Bedi among others.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF ADITI'S WORK

Initially Aditi's work was criticized a lot as it was touching upon a topic that was considered to be a taboo among a majority of people. However, slowly, she began to receive positive reviews for her work. A majority of online media and portals consider her work to be very important in raising awareness among the current generation of young girls. Aditi is also a World Economic Forum Global Shaper and made it to the achiever's list of Forbes India under 30 in 2014 for her work towards breaking the taboo around menstruation. She is an International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) alumni. Her work has been featured in The Wall Street Journal, Reuters, CNBC and BBC.

### SUGGESTION AND CONCLUSION

'Menstrupedia' is one book that every girl must read as soon as she turns 9. In this book girls will find answers to questions related to changing body, periods, nutrition and care taking during periods. This book helps young girls learn on their own in the most easy and fun way using stories and cartoon characters. Women's health cannot be compromised due to unscientific claims and

myths. It is very important to have a discussion about menstruation so that the hesitation can be removed and more women can be made aware about the various aspect of women's health and menstruation including the adoption of the safe menstrual hygiene management. These are taboos people have across the world which are holding women back, thus excluding girls and women from many aspects of life and pose as a hurdle for their advancement. In order to improve the status of women in society, it is imperative to address these issues. The stigma which has been created by these prevailing beliefs should be busted. To break the taboo associated with menstruation, NGO "Sachchi Saheli" hosted a lunch event 'Period Feast' in which 28 women on periods cooked and served food to more than 300 guests. Menstruation is a fact of life a Period, it is a natural biological process that should be taken as it is.

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