

The Sabarimala Confusion
MENSTRUATION ACROSS CULTURES
A Historical Perspective

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Publisher's Note

As women ourselves, for the last two decades, we have been following India's menstruation story, all its ups and downs, smiles and cries. We are acutely aware that the Sabarimala discourse does not end with court judgements. When Nithin Sridhar started writing online, we felt it was time for an entire book on the subject, of primal importance to half a billion women of this country. We had a tradition, handed down through ages. Our ancient texts prescribed a litany of Dos and Don'ts. Most of these are corrupted after 5,000 years of misuse.

The Essence of it is: The husband must not leave the company of his wife for fifteen days after the start of menstrual period but is not to seek union with her during the menses period. It was customary for the women, after the child-birth to go to the public tank for bathing. During the period of impurity, 'the women were unapproachable' and must not touch the domestic utensils.

In Sangam period (c. 200 BC to 250 AD) literary sources of the age such as *Tolkappiyam*, *Pattuppattu*, *Ettuttokai*, *Cilappatikaram* and *Manimekalai*, much of it written by women poets of the times and with dynamic female protagonists, did refer to menstruation.

It is again India's modern young women poets who are putting menstruation into perspective:

*Just remember,
A man bleeds for death.
for agony and for misery.
Do you know why a woman bleeds?
She bleeds for glee.
for happiness.
and to create a new life.*

—Greshma

HappyToBleed Campaign

Amrita Institute of Medical Sciences

*If my body's made of stardust and my skin matches land,
If my body's geology can make continents tremble and mountains
move*

You aren't allowed to tell me that I should be shy

Because I paint the town red for a week, every month of my life.

—Haiku by

Aranya Johar

So this book.

Foreword

Menstruation is one of the most natural of all processes in this mortal world and yet one which is hedged in by so many mysteries and obfuscations, such a reluctance to talk of it and discuss it in the clear light of day that many misconceptions have grown around it like the ant hill around Maharshi Chyavan.

This book by Nithin Sridhar, who is making a name for himself as a contemporary explorer and explainer of Sanatana Dharma is a timely and excellent attempt to set the record straight about menstruation in the Indic tradition and compare it with ideas from different cultures past and present to put it in perspective.

In 'common' understanding, menstruation in the Indic, and especially the Hindu, tradition is all about taboos and restrictions all leading to unhealthy results.

This book breaks this myth and painstakingly details the meaning and understanding the Hindu Shastras have of menstruation and how it fits in with the philosophy and schema of human life in general.

It is one of the most frustrating paradoxes of contemporary India that Hindus do not know their own roots or traditions. The Islamic invasion, the colonial imposition and the Eurocentrism of the past few centuries have resulted in vast swathes of people being ignorant about themselves. To add to it is the existence today of an alienated

urban culture in India which is drifting in a sea of confusion. All roots with the past, the passing down of best practices from mother to daughter and grandmother to granddaughter have been brutally sidelined in the name of modernity.

The discourse is therefore trapped in alien and imported categories which fit neither the reality nor the practices around menstruation which had been followed for centuries. Rest is equated with banishment, care with taboos, attention to reproductive health with chauvinism and there is a forcible attempt to impose fixed categories on to a plethora of different customs.

To be absolutely clear, the thrust is not about moving into the past but about moving the present into a rooted and practical scheme relying on best Indic practices.

Many Abrahamic ideas of impurity have found their way into the mainstream narrative in India and attached themselves to the modern Hindu way of life. This book clarifies the matter by exhaustively setting down Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Islamic and other traditions relating to menstruation.

Sridhar has shown that the centrality of the Hindu idea of menstruation as *an agent of purity* and *a form of tapa* is far from being the 'punishment' for original sin it is seen as in Christianity or the strong associations with an impurity in the Islamic tradition. It has been the focus of celebration and worship for centuries although today's generation is very often unaware of traditions different from

the regurgitated vaguely western ideas that have a strong hold on them.

The comprehensive and three sixty degree treatment of the subject matter is all very well but what, one may ask, is the utility of doing this? Is it academic? No doubt it is, and one hopes to see this book a focal point of academic references in this area as the author has desired, but the real utility is much more immediate and should relate to actual practices.

Menstrual disorders are assuming epic proportions in India. The food, lifestyle, the pressures of modern living, the incessant demand on girls and women leave them with scant time to focus on their own monthly needs and necessities. The message today is to be up and going, no matter what; menstrual periods are an inconvenience which has to be wrestled into submission. The body, however, reacts; nature cannot be repressed without consequences. These consequences have led to an increasing menstrual malaise amongst Indian women.

To deal with this, can we look at an alternative model which is both in sync with today's needs and also incorporates principles proven over millennia adapted for today? With an eye to the reproductive health of women, which is a major area of concern, perhaps each reader can take away something of practical value from this work. The section on Ayurvedic principles and practices for menstruation can be of great significance for this aspect.

Germaine Greer wrote *The Female Eunuch* in 1970 and assumed the place as a high priestess of the exclusive world of women. Feminists swear by her. Interesting then, that the idea of tasting menstrual blood, which caused such a stir, is nothing new for the Indic tradition and the *Chandamaharoshana tantra* discuss this centuries before Greer as this book tells us.

The point being, read this book with an open mind and a desire to learn. To paraphrase Shakespeare, there are more things in Hindu philosophy, Horatio, than are dreamt of in modern times and you will be the richer for having read this book.

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Preface

It was towards the end of 2015. The year was coming to a close and the issue of women's entry into the Sabarimala Temple had yet again erupted everywhere in the media. The Sabarimala temple dedicated to Lord Ayyappa Swami is a very important religious, spiritual and pilgrimage center for the Hindus. According to the traditions followed in the temple, women between menarche and menopause are not allowed inside it.

There was a veritable hue and cry in the media and among the activists who shouted in their hoarse voices – day in and day out – about how this practice was anti-women and misogynistic. The narrative soon turned very toxic and the target was no longer limited to just one temple, but the entire Hindu Dharma; its cultures and traditions being called into question.

There was something wrong with this entire narrative. It was built upon misunderstanding, misinformation and obfuscation. For one, it was wrongly portrayed that there was a blanket ban on the entry of all women into the temple, suppressing the fact that young girls and old women regularly visited the temple. Two, it was portrayed as a discrimination against women, without taking into account how the same State – Kerala – has women specific-temples and practices, where men are not allowed, and that there are other Ayyappan temples in Kerala where women of all ages are also allowed, thus

making the charge of discrimination quite shallow and without basis. Three, the entire narrative was more or less built on a one-sided and often distorted account of the issue, and no voice or agency was given to Hindu practitioners and devotees of the Ayyappan temple to express their perspective.

More importantly, there was a clever obfuscation of the fact that the question of a person's entry into the temple is a Dharmic issue which has to take into consideration a number of factors including the Agamic rules, the purpose of the temple and the nature of the deity whose presence the temple holds. Instead, it was projected as an issue of women's rights, and used to portray Hinduism as inherently misogynistic.

To counter this obfuscation, I had immediately written an article in January 2016 titled 'Why Sabarimala controversy is religious issue, not women's rights issue' for *NewsGram*. It was my understanding at that time that many people may have been genuinely unaware about the Sabarimala temple and its deity-specific unique practices. But, it was in the following weeks that I realised that ignorance and misinformation run much deeper.

The focus of the activists and media professionals soon shifted from temple-specific restrictions to how there is a general dehumanisation of women in the form of menstruation taboos. It was argued that though menstruation is merely a natural biological activity, Hindu women are dehumanised by considering them dirty, and by

keeping them away from temples, which clearly forms gender discrimination.

I must confess that there was a time when even I believed that all these Hindu life-style practices surrounding menstruation were merely a product of superstition. This was further reinforced by the silence and avoidance of the topic by people in general, family elders in particular. Since no answer to the questions posed about the Hindu treatment of menstruation was coming forth from any quarters, I decided to examine the issue intensively.

The following weeks were spent in research into a large number of Hindu texts and living traditions, which fructified in the form of a six-part series titled 'Hindu view of Menstruation', which was published in *IndiaFacts* in 2016. It was during this time that Renu Kaul Verma of Vitasta Publishing approached me with a proposal for expanding my work on menstruation into a full-fledged book.

Now, two years later, I am finally ready with this book. The whole journey in writing this book has been one of learning and discovery. I had never thought I would explore ancient civilisations of the West like the Greek civilisation and the Egyptian civilisation or the history of Abrahamic religions. This book allowed me to explore this realm and to understand religions and civilisations from across the world. More importantly, it helped me dive even deeper into the Hindu civilisation and unravel its knowledge, beauty and diversity. It is my hope that the readers will enjoy reading the book as much as I did writing it.

Finally, I would like to express my deep regards to my parents who have always encouraged me in all my endeavours. My wife Pratyasha has been a constant source of support and inspiration besides being the first reader of the manuscript. Her inputs have been highly valuable to me. I cannot thank Renu Kaul Verma and the entire team of Vitasta Publishing enough for bringing out this book. I am very thankful to Sumedha Verma Ojha for writing the Foreword to the book. I would also like to thank Nagaraja Gundappa and Dr Sammod Acharya for helping with the research at the initial stage, and Sankrant Sanu for sharing his valuable inputs when the original series of articles were written. My deep regards to my employer and mentor Hari Kiran Vadlamani who has been a great source of support and has acted as a facilitator in my various writing projects.

I would also like to thank some of my friends with whom I have discussed my book or took suggestions about the title: Ashish Dhar, Neha Srivastava, Sahana Singh and Saiswaroopaa Iyer. I would also like to thank Dr Ulrike Steinert for sharing her research and helping me appreciate the knowledge embedded in the Mesopotamian civilisation.

And last, but not the least, no endeavour will be successful without the blessings of Ishwara and Guru. I submit this book at the lotus feet of my Guru and Kali, my Ishta.

Introduction

Menstruation is a natural biological process that women undergo during a major period of their lives. In many a sense, menstruation, owing to its relationship with fertility and motherhood, is something that is closely associated with womanhood, and it indicates how women as individuals are different from men on many levels. Hence, menstruation has always played an important role in how various societies and cultures across the world have perceived women; man-woman relationships, and the role of women in society, as a whole.

Yet, in contemporary India, the discourse around menstruation has been much skewed and we can see huge obfuscations on the matter. A good example to illustrate this obfuscation is the currently burning issue of Sabarimala temple entry.

In the famous Sabarimala Ayyappa Swamy temple, there has been a prohibition on the entry of women of reproductive age for hundreds of years. While the prohibition itself is part of the temple tradition brought into practice to cater to the unique nature of the deity who resides in this temple in the form of a Naishtika Brahmachari (the eternal celibate) and has nothing to do with menstruation per se, there is a misguided and perhaps motivated narrative in the media and mainstream discourse that posits Sabarimala as a menstruation issue

and the prohibition as being due to Hinduism treating menstruation as impure and dirty. Thus, the obfuscation in the issue is two-fold: that Sabarimala prohibition is related to menstruation, while it clearly is not; and that Hinduism perceives menstruation in a disparaging manner and uses it to oppress women.

While much has been written on the first aspect, very less has been written about Hindu notions of menstruation. Our contemporary narrative has largely focused on sanitary needs, women's health, and hygiene. Media, academic literature, TV Ads – all of them almost exclusively focus on how girls and women in India suffer from unhygienic menstrual practices owing to lack of access to sanitary pads and menstrual taboos imposed by superstitious patriarchy.

An academic paper, for example, states in its abstract that, 'Menstrual hygiene continues to be amongst the most challenging development issues today. Not only do deep-rooted taboos, myths and misinformation create the illusion that menstruation is inherently shameful, gross and weird, but in countries like India, women and girls often lack access to hygienic sanitary materials and basic facilities such as sanitary pads necessary for good menstrual hygiene management'.

Media reports routinely quote a 2010 study done by AC Nielsen to point out that only 12 per cent of India's 355 million menstruating women use sanitary napkins with the rest using 'shocking alternatives like unsanitised cloth, ashes and husk sand'.

Media reports also note how girls drop out of school or miss classes during menstruation owing to lack of access to sanitary pads, toilets and cultural taboos about menstruation.

Then, there are a number of TV ads telecasted day-in and day-out on various channels, which portray menstruation as an impediment to women's freedom, participating in schools and sports etc. and posit sanitary napkins as the ultimate solution to this.

With the production of the popular Akshay Kumar film, *Padman*, this discourse about menstruation, which portrays cultural taboos and lack of access to sanitary pads as the root of all menstrual problems, and then posits sanitary pads as the ultimate solution to all such menstrual issues, has been reinforced.

Further, there are many documentaries and educational videos which explicitly portray Hindu traditions, cultural beliefs and practices regarding menstruation as being patriarchal and oppressive to women. One such example is a Bollywood show titled 'Sex Ki Adalat – Menstruation' directed by Feroz Abbas Khan.

The documentary portrays a court scene involving a Tamil Hindu couple, in which the husband stands accused of oppressing his wife during her monthly periods. The husband is shown as considering menstruation as an impurity due to which he forces his wife to remain in seclusion and separated from him and their children. The documentary neither explores the meaning of terms such as impurity nor does it explore the probable, rational or cultural knowledge associated with practices such as seclusion. It focusses entirely on

framing this cultural knowledge and these practices as superstitious and oppressive.

Thus, India's contemporary discourse around menstruation, sanitation needs and associated women's health has been reduced to positing: 1. India as a country with lack of access to hygienic menstrual products and practices; 2. Indian cultural beliefs and practices, especially those derived from Hindu traditions as regressive and patriarchal.