

Menstruation: Debunking today's myths with Ancient Indian Sciences

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Abstract:

Indian menstruators have followed various menstrual rituals or beliefs for an eternity now. These rules and restrictions constructed in ancient India were based on numerous observations and logics and were handed down to women through centuries of chain of wisdom by their mothers and grandmothers. Today's modern women though don't shy away from calling every restriction a myth and every cultural practise a sham. To resolve this confusion, this article explores the various menstrual beliefs and practices from India along with the logical explanations from an array of literature as to why these practices were started in the first place.

Keywords: Ayurveda, Rajaswala, Menstruation, India, menstrual myths

Problem Statement: The current waves of feminism in India have deemed centuries of menstrual beliefs and practices to be nothing more than shams and myths.^[1] Its time to understand that India was the cradle of all knowledge and civilisation for thousands of years for the world.^[2-4] The women may not be knowing the true reason behind various rules and restrictions which they practised during menstruation, but believed them to be for their health and happiness and followed them religiously.^[5] We the modern women though do not believe in ancestral knowledge and need evidence for all that exists. Here are some myths the modern Indian women need to resolve with wisdom from ancient India.

Myth1. Women are impure and untouchable during periods

Menstruation is deemed to be a monthly purification process of the physical, mental and spiritual aspects of a woman. Physical Cleansing in form of bleeding which gets rid of tissues and unfertilised ovum which is no longer needed in the body. Body gets rid of excess *ama*[°] (accumulated toxins) during menstruation through active lymphatic system.^[6-7] Mental cleansing by releasing anger and provoking thoughts and spiritual cleansing by practising seclusion from worldly pleasures for a period of 3 days. It signifies detachment, self-reflection and overcoming attachments/greed that we can't let go off in daily life with ultimate motive of moving closer to Moksha (the greater purpose of human life). Menstruation is a self-purification process by which body restores the balance of Prana by getting rid of excess *rajas*. Hence practices like seclusion, self-reflection, restriction of certain foods, anointing of body (and applying collyrium to eyes), comforts (e.g., comfort of soft bedding) and avoiding sexual intercourse are recommended to take a step towards detachment from worldly pleasures and attain higher order of self-control and peace in life.

Myth2. Menstruation is Lord *Indra*'s curse to women

It is believed that menstruation is actually a curse from Lord *Indra* (king of Indian deities) to all women and hence a punishment to bleed for a sin committed. But *Indra*'s shared curse^[8] is actually a boon granted to women to bear children following menstruation and enjoy sexual intercourse at will other than the time of menstruation. This boon is related to fertility more than menstruation and indicates suitable time of conception (hence sex not advised during menstruation). This boon also indicates menstruation is a natural phenomenon. Just like a fissure formed in the Earth is natural and bleeding of sap from a pruned tree is normal; a menstruator bleeds every month naturally and its nothing to be ashamed of.

Myth3. Women must not enter kitchen during periods

During menstruation around 10% of women experience discomfort and pain severe enough to hamper their day-to-day activities and this fact was well noted in ancient India too. This led to formation of restrictions in order to allow menstruating women to take time for physical and mental rest from the demanding everyday tasks and take benefit of this time to restore their health. This practice is shown through religious festivals such as *Ambubachi* in Assam,^[9] *Raja* festival in Odisha, *Thripurattu* in Kerala and *Keddassa* in Karnataka state where the women (should not work), the Earth (shouldn't be dug/ploughed) and the Goddess (no temple visits) are given rest and offerings for 3 days to signify importance of maintaining health and happiness associated with the cycle of fertility.

Myth4. Menstruating women should not enter temple or religious place

1. “What is pure, we don’t touch and what we don’t touch we call it a taboo. She was so pure that she was worshipped as a Goddess.”^[10,11] During menstruation, the woman is considered sacred like a living Goddess.^[12] So much that if she enters the temple, the energy residing in the God/Goddess idol (*murti*) also move over to her, leaving the idol lifeless. Hence to avoid energy imbalances in places of worship, restriction of entry for menstruating women were put into place since ancient times in India. Even the colour red which signifies auspiciousness and growth in Indian culture is due to its linkage to the blood of menstruation. There is no doubt that menstruation has always been considered sacred and positive process since the time of Ancient India and deserves to be appreciated, respected and celebrated instead of making women feel inferior while menstruating.
2. Yogic Science and menstruation: All downward movements in the body such as defecation, menstruation and orgasm happen by *Apana Vayu*^[13] which is one of the five *prana vayus* that keep a person alive. Yoga/ meditation/ Puja rituals all try to bring the *apana vayu* towards upward direction in order to develop spiritual concentration of the mind. During menstruation if the downward directed *Apana vayu* is disturbed by performing any of these activities, it can lead to physical and psychological problems in the individual in the long run.

What is Rajaswala Paricharya?

Ayurveda suggests following of certain rules^[14] during periods for a healthy menstrual life. Ayurveda is based on doshic balance of *Vata-Pitta* and *Kapha*[§]. During menstruation *Vata* dosha is in excess hence activities aggravating *Vata* dosha further need to be restricted. The 8 restricted activities during menstruation as per Ayurveda include – talking loudly, excessive walking, travelling in vehicles, sitting in one place for long time, having food in *ajeerna awastha*[#], having non prescribed food, daytime naps and sexual intercourse. Avoiding the above activities are considered to assist women in the purification process (menstruation), restore health and aid digestion.

Table 1. Summary of Restrictions recommended during Menstruation as per Rajaswala Paricharya^[5,15]

Restriction recommended	Reasons for Restriction
No cooking (not to touch fresh fruits and vegetables meant for whole family)	Excess <i>Rajas</i> ⁺ during menstruation ^[16] (may affect another’s energy) Menstruation is the time for rest to body and mind
No sexual intercourse	Excess <i>Rajas</i> during menstruation (may affect another’s energy)
No bathing (hygiene needs to be maintained)	Aggravation of <i>apana vayu</i> ^[17] can happen
No collyrium, no make-up, no anointing of body	Menstruation is a time for austerity and detachment
Segregation/ social distancing	Excess <i>rajas</i> during menstruation (may affect another’s energy)

	Absence of proper menstrual absorbents to handle bleeding in ancient times hence, for the menstruators comfort segregation and privacy was followed Menstruation is a time for austerity and detachment
No physical exertion, no excess walking, no excess talking/laughing	Menstruation is the time for rest to body and mind
No entry to religious place or participation in religious rituals	Menstruation needs <i>apana vayu</i> to flow downwards while spirituality brings <i>apana vayu</i> upwards Excess Rajas during menstruation (may affect another's energy) Energy imbalance can occur by interaction of energy of menstruator and energy placed in the worshipped Idol Worshipper needs to be physically, mentally and spiritually pure and Sattvic to be eligible to pray: while menstruation the energy and cleanliness both are not in the right place for worship Menstruation produces a specific odour by nature

Summary and Conclusion

The way we think about periods has changed a lot over centuries of development and so many different menstrual hygiene products are also available today. But myths or restrictions followed during menstruation still seem to be unclear and have come under the scanner of feminism for the wrong reasons. There is logic and wisdom in many of the menstrual restrictions in order for women to have a good quality of life during the reproductive years. In today's world where more than half the menstruators are working outside the home and the families are nuclear; it's extremely difficult and impractical to follow the restrictions as recommended in ancient India. Hence every menstruator should decide for themselves as to which restrictions they can follow comfortably and only after understanding the reason for the restriction. After all, the motive of these restrictions was to rejuvenate the female body to prepare for another energetic month of life and not to shame or belittle the creator of life that every woman is. Only happy and healthy menstruators can bring forth a healthy and content world for everyone to live in.

Glossary:

^{\$}*Vata, Pitta, Kapha*: These are the three doshas of the human body which are responsible for all bodily functions. Vata governs all movements, Pitta governs all transformations and Kapha governs all structures in the body. A balance of the three doshas in the human body is needed to maintain good health.

[^]*Apana Vayu*: Apana Vayu is one of the five Prana Vayus, ruling vital functions of our body and its responsible for downward and outward movements in the lower half of body such as excretion, menstruation and sexual functions.

[#]*Ajeerna awastha*: a state of low digestive fire (*agni*) which leads to risk of development of indigestion

°*Ama*: Toxins build up in human body due to various factors like wrong food intake, lack of exercise, stress, poor lifestyle choices etc.

†*Rajas*: Rajas, Tamas and Sattva are the three basic *gunas* or quality of human nature. When Rajas Guna is in excess, it creates hyperactivity, excessive thinking, and anxiety.

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