



EXPLORING SOCIAL INCLUSION OF WOMEN THROUGH THE PORTRAYAL OF MENSTRUAL HYGIENE IN THE CONTEMPORARY THEMED BASED DURGA PUJAS IN KOLKATA

Soumya Narayan Datta ¹  & Prof. (Dr.) Ruby Sain ²

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Author Details:

¹ Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Adamas University, Kolkata, West Bengal, India;

² Professor, Department of Sociology, Adamas University, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Corresponding Author:

Prof. (Dr.) Ruby Sain

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Abstract

Menstruation refers to the monthly cycle of vaginal bleeding, typically occurring approximately every twenty eight days from the endometrium of the uterus. Although menstruation is a natural biological process and an important indicator of reproductive health, it is often viewed as shameful, dismissive, or unclean in many cultures. This ongoing silence surrounding menstruation, along with the lack of accessible information at home and in educational settings, leaves numerous women and girls with little to no understanding of the physiological changes occurring in their bodies and the ways to manage menstruation. While enhancing women inclusivity this paper draws attention towards eliminating taboos surrounding menstrual hygiene that segregates women from performing any religious rituals or duties expressed through a cultural carnival of thematic depictions in the Durga pujas of Kolkata.

Keywords: social inclusion, menstruation, themes, Durga Puja, Satipeeth, tantric practice

Introduction

Menstruation is a natural occurrence linked to a woman's reproductive capability. The beginning of menstruation, known as menarche, marks a significant milestone in the lives of adolescent girls. Menstruation involves regular vaginal bleeding due to the sloughing off of the uterine lining, symbolizing the onset of puberty. Each day, over 355 million women and girls experience menstruation. Menarche, the initial phase of menstruation, typically takes place between the ages of 12 and 13 in girls (Choudhary. 2022).

A feminist and intersectional theoretical framework has been applied to the examination of menstruation as a socially constructed experience rather than solely a biological condition.. Feminist theories explores in what ways the power dynamics that are gendered controls the bodies of women, shape the daily experiences and assert the social hierarchy that appears to be existing (Thapa, 2026). Menstruation describes in what ways natural functions of the body are subjected to devaluation, cultural governance and systematic neglect. Menstruation is often shrouded in restrictions, stigma and secrecy that has a disproportionate impact on girls and women (Thapa, 2026). A feminist approach moves the emphasis from the body itself to the social dynamics that states in what ways inequality affects it. Among feminists a central argument is that the patriarchal structure has relied traditionally on exertion of control over the reproductive and bodily capabilities of women. Menstruation has been often showed as contaminating, erratic or unclean that has led to laws restricting visibility, domestic roles and mobility (Thapa, 2026). Such restrictions not just serve as tools for regulating the bodies of women but are also presented as traditional or cultural practices. Within the context of India, research on patriarchy and caste shows that body management is closely interweaved with concepts of purity, social hierarchy and honor. Gender injustice gets intensified through geographical ostracism, caste exclusion and poverty (Thapa, 2026). Women from the urban middle class may face stigma related with menstruation while a poor young girl from a rural background not just encounter lack of funds to purchase products, menstrual stigma but also inadequate toilets and insufficient information simultaneously. The result of these obstacles that appears to be layered leads to dissimilar experiences of menstrual inequality that are held to be significant (Thapa, 2026). Due to the systemic and long standing nature of social stratification, the intersectional approach is significant especially in India. On the basis of class and caste differences, resources like health, consumer goods, education and sanitation are unevenly distributed. Research has indicated that the adoption of hygienic menstrual practices has a significant association with urban lifestyles, education and wealth (Thapa, 2026). In the same way, women from communities that are marginalized experience often greater sanitation challenges and also have less support

of the government. Thus, the shortcomings related to menstruation cannot just solely be assigned to gender, but are shaped instead by the intersection of various other social hierarchies (Thapa, 2026).

Menstrual Hygiene and Health as a tool towards women inclusivity

In many cultures, there is a lack of understanding regarding menstruation, leading to negative perceptions. Insufficient knowledge and information result in various unwarranted restrictions on the daily lives of menstruating women and girls. In numerous cultures, individuals lack sufficient understanding about menstruation, which is unfortunate. This lack of knowledge and information results in various unnecessary limitations affecting the daily lives of women and girls who are menstruating (Menstrual Health, n.d.). For instance, they are often prohibited from entering places of worship during their menstrual cycle because of the belief that they are impure. Women are also not permitted to handle sacred texts as they are deemed unclean. Certain dietary restrictions are imposed, with girls advised against consuming ghee, butter, or milk. Parents often think that if adolescent girls eat a nutritious diet, they will grow taller and their menstrual flow will increase (Menstrual Health, n.d.). Moreover, in some cultures, there are rules against menstruating women bathing. As a result of these limitations and a lack of understanding, women often lack knowledge about how to manage their periods in a hygienic manner. Thus, it is essential to grasp the concept of menstrual hygiene management (Menstrual Health, n.d.). The WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme defines menstrual hygiene management as: "Women and adolescent girls utilize clean menstrual management materials to absorb or collect menstrual blood, which can be changed privately as frequently as needed, using soap and water for washing their bodies as necessary, and having access to safe and convenient disposal facilities for used menstrual management materials. They possess knowledge about the fundamental facts related to the menstrual cycle and how to manage it with dignity, comfort, and without fear" (Menstrual Health, n.d.).

Enhancing menstrual hygiene and ensuring access to affordable menstrual products can facilitate girls' and women's educational opportunities, leading to more job choices, promotions, and entrepreneurial ventures, thereby allowing their contributions to the overall economy instead of confining them to domestic roles. Furthermore, for feminine hygiene products, the market is worth billions and it is thought that effective harnessing leads to creating opportunities for income for many and also enhances economic development significantly (Menstrual Health, n.d.). In nations having low income, half of the schools lack sanitation, sufficient water and hygiene facilities that is essential for enabling girls and female teachers to handle their menstruation. Various studies imply that lack of sufficient sanitary amenities creates an impact on the experiences of girls in school that results in missing of classes during their periodic cycle or even also leading them towards school dropouts (Menstrual Health, n.d.). Educational institutions contribute towards diminishing stigma and lead towards improved health and educational results that provide facilities favourable for women and also includes menstrual education in their curriculum. Girls and women lower their chances of having infections when they have access to reasonably priced and safe sanitary products to handle their menstruation. This can have a spillover effect on the total reproductive and sexual health including improved maternal outcomes, better fertility prospects and lower rates of teenage pregnancy (Menstrual Health, n.d.). Insufficient menstrual hygiene on the other hand could lead to health issues that are significant such as urinary and reproductive tract infections that may cause infertility in future and childbirth complications. Infections including hepatitis B and thrush gets transmitted if there is no washing of hands after changing menstrual products. In order to protect the dignity, privacy, bodily autonomy and ultimately self-efficacy of the women, advancing menstrual hygiene and health is crucial (Menstrual Health, n.d.). Through an understanding of menstrual hygiene and health, creation of an inclusive environment free from discrimination is fostered and gender equality gets promoted in which voices of women are acknowledged and so, regarding their future girls can make choices and women are provided opportunities to take on management and leadership roles (Menstrual Health, n.d.). Using disposable sanitary products leads to certain amounts of global waste. The environment greatly benefits if the girls and the women are provided access to high-quality and eco-friendly products, along with improvement of the disposable management of items related with menstruation (Menstrual Health, n.d.).

Menstrual blood in Indian religious practices

Within Indic religious traditions from the context of a broader perspective, the significance of menstruation blood needs to be examined. The societal role of the individual changes through the onset of puberty that marks an initiation into sexual life. Within these traditions, Puranic, Brahmanic and Vedic literature discusses menstruation blood which is frequently depicted in a negative manner indicating a taboo (Kakati, 2024). In Brahmanical texts, a menstruating woman is considered impure and viewed with fear. During the period of menstruation, a woman should stop doing all activities and segregate herself in shame to avoid being seen and must wear only a single piece of cloth and abstain from bathing and adorning herself. She is expected to limit her gaze, hands and feet and live in silence and only can eat once at night from a clay vessel (Kakati, 2024). On the fourth day of sunrise, she is regarded as pure as she is allowed to bathe and clean her clothes after remaining undisturbed on the ground for three nights. A significant aspect that must not be ignored in this connection is the dichotomy of pure and impure (Kakati, 2024). Menstrual blood and women who are menstruating are both seen as impure, yet after she bathes, she is considered pure, despite the continuation of her blood flow. In this context, water symbolizes purity and the removal of impurity. It serves as a religious symbol that can transform the impure into the pure (Kakati, 2024).

In non-mainstream Indic religious movements such as Buddhism, the restrictions related to menstrual blood and women who are menstruating sharply differ from those found in Brahmanic traditions (Kakati, 2024). The symbolism of impurity, which was significantly emphasized in Brahmanic tradition concerning menstruation, is less emphasized in Buddhism. Menstruation is perceived quite differently within Jainism. Menstruation, in particular, is regarded as resulting in the destruction of

microorganisms on a large scale. It is considered a source of injury (himsa) to sub-microscopic life, and female reproductive organs are described as a breeding ground for tiny forms of life. Nevertheless, this perspective appears to be biased against women within the sect, hindering their ability to take on leadership roles (Kakati, 2024). Sikhism offers a broader and more accepting perspective on menstruation compared to other religious traditions. It is among the rare groups that has directly addressed the societal issues and taboos related to women and has taken a position against them, not only to discourage and dismiss these problems but also to uplift the status of women within the community (Kakati, 2024). Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, rejected the idea of impurity linked to menstruating women. He supported the view that women, even during their menstrual cycle, should be allowed to visit Gurudwaras (Sikh places of worship) and engage in prayer (Kakati, 2024).

Menstrual blood in Tantric practices and the menstruating Goddess Kamakhya

In the tantric tradition, blood symbolizes two separate concepts: the sacrificial blood from offerings and menstrual blood. Sacrifice is a key ritual in this tradition. In contrast to the Vedic tradition, which kills the victim by strangulation, the tantric tradition executes the sacrifice through beheading, regarded as the foremost offering to the deity. Menstrual blood plays a role in the tantric practices of the Shakta tradition and has influenced other Hindu beliefs as well (Kakati, 2024). This specific tradition has integrated various ancient tribal rituals, which include the utilization of menstrual blood. Within the tantric framework, menstruating women are regarded not as unclean or unlucky but instead, the menstruation of the Goddess is honored as sacred (Kakati, 2024). This tradition accepts aspects that are often considered taboo by others, such as menstrual blood, semen, and sexual union. The purpose of Tantra is to harness the tremendous power linked to these 'impure' substances, converting what is usually viewed as contaminating into a source of divine energy (Kakati, 2024).

In India there are fifty-one SatiPeethas based on the broader understanding and the Goddess is revered under various names at each Peethasthan. Among these, Kamakhya is particularly significant. This Peethasthan is named as one of the four main Peethas. Kamakhya is known to fulfill the wishes of her devotees (Sengupta, 2020). The Kalikapurana mentions that this goddess is referred to as Kamakhya because she embodies Kamada, Kamini, Kama, Kasta, Kamangadayini, and Kamanganashini. During the event of Sati's body being dismembered in Vishnu's cycle, the goddess's vulva is said to have fallen at a site called Kubjika. The length of this vagina measures twenty-one fingers, while its width is one and a half hands. This mandal is adorned with gold topas, and vermilion and kumkum are placed upon it. The goddess Mahamaya resided at this location in Panchamurti. The names of this Panchamurthi include Kamakhya, Tripura, Kameshwari, Sarada, and Mohotsaha. Goddess Bhairava is revered here as Umananda or Ramananda. Kamakhya is considered a sacred Peetha (Sengupta, 2020). Kamakhya, the deity symbolized by the yoni, is said to experience menstruation once a year, an event known as the Ambubachi Mela. This celebration takes place in the month of June and is a major event for both the temple and the state of Assam. The roots of this festival, much like Kamakhya herself, are enveloped in enigma. For three days, the temple doors are closed and then reopened on the fourth day, permitting devotees and pilgrims to come back (Kakati, 2024). The festival is also recognized within every Assamese household, referred to as xat, where homes are tidied in preparation for the temple's reopening. The word 'Ambubachi' comes from 'ambu' and the feminine suffix 'vacī', representing the goddess's menstrual cycle. The rituals of the festival commence with the athparia, which involves covering the pithasthan with red cloths (Kakati, 2024). Afterward, access to the temple is restricted to only the athparia and the duari, who are responsible for tending to the three lamps in the calanta area. During this period, the nitya puja is conducted at Kamesvari, along with the traditional practice of sacrificing a he-goat. The menstrual cycle of Kamakhya carries symbolic meaning, and comprehending this symbolism is essential for understanding the essence of the Goddess (Kakati, 2024).

Encouraging women inclusivity by breaking the taboos surrounding menstruation in the thematic Durga Pujas of Kolkata

During Durga Puja, the goddess is revered in both maternal and daughterly forms. However, in practice, a menstruator faces limitations during their menstruating days within this society. Kolkata, known as India's cultural capital, evolved into a dynamic canvas for creativity as communities vie to design the most imaginative and thought-provoking themes for their Durga Puja pandals. From Mahalaya to Dashami, Kolkata transforms into a stage for numerous artistic exhibitions (Naskar, 2023). The theme-based Durga Pujas have introduced a fresh perspective to this celebration, transforming it into a lively display of creativity and innovation. This innovation frequently presents several thought-provoking concepts relevant to the current times. Pathuria Ghata Pancher Palli Durga Puja Committee in its 84th year in 2023 initiated this effort to raise awareness about restrictions during menstrual days (Naskar, 2023). Historically and in various cultures, individuals who menstruate have frequently been excluded from engaging in religious practices and accessing places of worship. For instance, the Sabarimala temple in Kerala upheld a long-standing custom that barred women between the ages of 10 and 50 from entering its grounds (Naskar, 2023). This restriction stemmed from the notion that it is impossible to ascertain whether a woman is menstruating, and menstruating women are deemed "Impure." In a similar vein, menstruating individuals in the Muslim community around the globe are prohibited from visiting mosques or participating in prayers during their menstrual periods. Additionally, Jewish menstruators also encounter restrictions during their periods. In addition to restrictions in temples, those who menstruate also face limitations in their homes and kitchens (Naskar, 2023). They experience discrimination in their workplaces as well. According to a report, many young menstruators in the western state of Maharashtra have resorted to surgical procedures to have their wombs removed in order to retain their jobs. A backward practice known as "Chhaupadi" is prevalent in Nepal, where menstruators are sent away from their homes and must find refuge in cow sheds (Naskar, 2023). Similarly, some regions in India observe a practice called Gaokor, which involves

isolating menstruators outside their homes. Reports indicate that menstruators have died from snakebites while adhering to the Gaokor practice.

Pathuria Ghata Pancher Palli Durga Puja Committee aspired to be a force for change. They aimed to present the topic in a religious domain where it has long been prohibited (Naskar, 2023). This aspect made their pavilion truly distinctive. They titled their theme Ritumati, which directly refers to a 'menstruating individual'. The initiative seek to dismantle the stigma surrounding menstrual hygiene and foster awareness about it. The pandal served as a visual depiction of the menstrual cycle, illustrating different phases of womanhood. The decorations were artistically arranged, highlighting the color red (representing blood), that symbolized the menstrual cycle (Naskar, 2023). The concept originated from Artist Manash Roy, who expressed his personal emotions about this topic. He shared that during his childhood, he would play with his siblings, but occasionally he noticed his sisters lying down due to stomach pains and not joining in the fun. Roy mentioned that he was unaware of the underlying reasons at the time, as this issue was kept from him. This experience motivated him to select this theme (Naskar, 2023). Roy stated that menstruation which is regarded as a taboo in our society can lead to complications if it is not experienced as the woman may be considered barren. Menstruation is a natural biological process that should be accepted as normal. Consequently, Roy presented his theme ideas to the Puja committee, which readily accepted them (Naskar, 2023). Manash shared that he had long desired to showcase this work during Durga Puja, as millions of people visit the pandals each year, allowing him to raise awareness among a large audience. Ellora Saha, who serves as the working president of the Pathuriaghata Pancher Palli Sarbojanin Durgotsab committee and is also a councillor for the Kolkata Municipal Corporation emphasized the necessity of addressing existing taboos (Naskar, 2023). She stated that menstruation is a natural biological occurrence and there is no cause to conceal it. These taboos can be confronted which is crucial, and to bring such topics into the open is an initial step. Saha noted that customs like Chhaupadi or Gaokor are simply forms of torture and must be abolished. She believes that education is essential, particularly starting from the home. Thus, they approved the theme proposed by Manash Roy, as they felt that the pandals featuring installations and sculptures would encourage visitors to face societal taboos related to menstruation (Naskar, 2023).

Saha stated that Shri Ramkrishna Paramhansa never stopped his wife Sarada Devi from engaging in worship during her menstruation. In this light, artist Roy expressed his disbelief that menstruation is still viewed as shameful. Inadequate menstrual hygiene practices can lead to reproductive health problems and urinary tract infections. India sees numerous cases of cervical cancer deaths annually, a significant portion attributed to poor menstrual hygiene (Naskar, 2023). Ellora Saha pointed out that it is essential for not only girls but also boys of the same age to understand the menstruation process. They should recognize that their sister, mother, daughter, and wife have experienced and will go through this process. She believed that the Puja Pandal can serve as a platform for education. The Puja Committee believes that the core of 'Ritumati' is not just in revealing the scientific significance of menstruation but also in embracing its symbolism (Naskar, 2023). It advocates for inclusivity, encouraging everyone to contribute to breaking down barriers that impede progress. They feel that if this initiative can change the mindset of even five individuals, it will have been worthwhile. Saha concluded that through 'Ritumati,' their message to menstruators is to stop from being shamed and hidden, and instead lift the veil. (Naskar, 2023).

Conclusion

Thus it can be understood that menstruation is not a shame which restricts women from entering temples and performing religious activities neither in the public nor the private sphere. It was also observed that menstruation creates a barrier for women to enter their home kitchen and also creates a discrimination in the workplace. Apart from girls, it is also essential for the boys to have an understanding about the menstruation process. The theme pujas of Pathuriaghata Pancher Pally in Kolkata serves the medium that enhances inclusivity for the women through the removal of taboos that hinders progress.

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