



ISSN: 0976-3031

Available Online at <http://www.recentscientific.com>

*International Journal of Recent Scientific Research*  
Vol. 6, Issue, 7, pp.4930-4934, July, 2015

**International Journal  
of Recent Scientific  
Research**

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# A STUDY OF MENSTRUAL TABOOS PREVALENT AMONG MUSLIM FEMALES OF BANIHAL, J&K

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article History:

Received 5<sup>th</sup>, June, 2015  
Received in revised form 12<sup>th</sup>,  
June, 2015  
Accepted 6<sup>th</sup>, July, 2015  
Published online 28<sup>th</sup>,  
July, 2015

#### Key words:

Menstruation, Taboos,  
Adolescent girls, Mothers,  
Muslims

### ABSTRACT

The present study explores the various taboos related to menstruation that exist among Muslim community of Banihal town, District Ramban, Jammu & Kashmir state. Menstruation is a significant physiological process which all normal and health females will go through in their life span. It has connotations for reproductive fertility as well as maturity. The sample for the study comprised of 100 Muslim adolescent girls in the age group of 13-19 years and 50 mothers having at least one adolescent daughter. The sample girls were selected randomly through their schools where as the mothers were drawn out purposively from a total of 05 villages of Banihal. Data was gathered through the use of focus group discussion separately from mothers and daughters. Results reveal that even today the females of this Muslim community tend to face a number of taboos related to dietary intake, religious activities, physical activities and hygiene. All sample mothers as well as the daughters were prohibited from performing any religious activities while they were menstruating. The females were especially instructed not to take citrus food, spicy and cold food during their periods. During their monthly cycle the females could not fast, pray, touch and read the Holy Quran; and couldn't visit shrines. Regarding physical activities the females were instructed not to get involved in physically rigorous activities and hence jumping and running were to be avoided. In some cases from hygiene point of view the females were asked to avoid taking bath during this time and were not allowed to cook and enter the kitchen. These results highlight that taboos related to menstruation are still prevalent in the selected community and that both the girls as well as their mothers followed them without much deviation or change. Mothers passed information about these taboos to their daughters and hence the taboos transcended one generation to another. Also, it was found that most sample females felt that these taboos were useful to them and hence never questioned their authenticity and efficacy.

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### INTRODUCTION

Menarche is an abrupt signal that marks a change in social status from child to adult. Cross-culturally, menarche has a variety of meanings that include adult responsibilities, freedoms, and expectations regarding reproduction. As with all cultural phenomena, there is a wide range of significance attached to menarche. The attitude of societies towards menarche varies from delight and pride to fear and shame. Positive labels signify that the girl is an adult, capable of contributing to the ongoing society (Jamadar, 2012). The behavioral patterns in response to menarche are usually influenced by certain taboos, beliefs, myths and superstitions and, in the adolescent they manifest themselves in fanciful and frightening suppositions such as: "periods are foul, I am not touchable", or "menstrual blood is excrement which a woman's body produces and casts out" (Gupta and Gupta, 2001). Taboos surrounding menarche can almost be called a "cultural universal". Many anthropologic accounts stress the importance of menarche as a sign of a girl's transition into womanhood, physical maturity, and fertility, and something to be celebrated.

Menstruation also has a long history of strict religious taboos across India which includes seclusion and removal from domestic duties. The two main religions in India, Hinduism and Islam, are the roots of many of these social customs and taboos. Menstruating Muslim women in the most conservative of families are restricted from praying, touching the Quran, and must take a holy bath on the seventh day to purify their body (Pednekar, 2010). In the strictest of Hindu families women who have their menses are kept separate from their household, not allowed to perform domestic duties, restricted from touching anything communal for fear of contamination, not allowed to go to temple or perform *pooja* (prayer), must sit in separate areas during religious festivals/weddings and sprinkle *tulsi* water or cow urine in the house after they bathe to "make it pure again" (Pednekar, 2010). In rural areas, adolescent girls consider menstruation as a sin or curse from God (Dasgupta & Sarkar, 2008). Cultural taboos include avoiding sour foods for fear of a smelly period, not touching certain food items to prevent contamination and the general belief that menstruation dispels contaminated/toxic blood. There is also the belief that the body is ridding itself of hot "negative energy" and warm baths can be harmful to the body and/or the environment

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(UNICEF India, 2008). Also, with in the Indian cultural context, attainment of menarche by girls is considered a biological indicator that the girl is ready for the commencement of sexual relations. This is evident from the traditional practice of “Gauna” that was commonly followed in the olden days (Jamadar, 2012).

With this as background the present research is designed as it attempts to unfurl the taboos related to menstruation prevalent among Muslims females of Banihal, a small Muslim dominated town of Ramban District of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The geographical locale of the study is one of the far-flung areas of the state, which has over the years been able to maintain its own sociocultural dynamics with only a limited acculturation influence. The level of literacy is low coupled with limited economic avenues. Hence, it was envisaged that the taboos related to menstruation followed by the females of the community be studied and further the perception of the young adolescent girls be analyzed towards the significance of these taboos in their lives.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Sample Description:** The core sample for the study comprised of 100 Muslim adolescent girls in the age group of 13-19 years and 50 mothers having at least one adolescent daughter from Banihal, District Ramban, Jammu And Kashmir State.

**Locale of the study:** The sample of adolescent girls was selected from different high schools and girls Higher Secondary School namely Girls Higher Secondary School, Govt High School Chareel, Govt High School Tethar, Govt High School Kaskoot, Govt High School Nowgam, Govt High School Dooligam. The sample of mothers was selected from different villages of Banihal namely Dershipura, Chareel, Tethar, Nowgam, Kaskoot.

**Sampling Technique:** Random sampling technique was used for the selection of the sample of adolescent girls. After a survey of Banihal Tehsil it was found that there were 05 Govt.High Schools and 01 Girls Higher Secondary School in the area. Adolescent girls were selected randomly from all these schools through lottery method.

15 girls each were selected from each Govt High Schools where as 25 girls were selected from the lone higher Secondary School. There are 50 notified villages of Banihal Block, out of these 05 villages were selected again by lottery method. The selected villages were namely Dershipura, Chareel, Tethar, Nowgam, and Kaskoot. Meetings with the members of the village representatives were held and with their support 10 women per village were selected purposively.

**Tools for Data Collection:** An interview schedule was used to gather information from the respondents. The schedule focused on understanding the various taboos and restrictions females faced during menstruation. Another part of the schedule focused on the adolescent girls’ perception towards the prevalent taboos.

**Data Analysis:** The data was analyzed through quantitative as well as qualitative procedures. Content analysis of the responses was carried out to derive the major results.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The results obtained are presented and discussed as follows:

**Nature of Taboos**

All the sample females reported encountering multiple taboos related to menstruation. All of them faced restrictions related to dietary intake where by they were prohibited for taking some specific foods during their monthly menstrual cycle. All of them also faced prohibitions related to religious activities such as praying, reading Quran, fasting, going to shrine (dargah). Both the adolescent girls as well as their mothers reported facing religious restriction during their monthly period once they attain menarche. 74% of sample females faced restrictions related to food during menstruation. Certain specific physical activities were also tabooed and hence the menstruating female couldn’t participate in those activities. The sample muslim females also faced restrictions related to their physical hygiene, and further these restrictions were followed more by the mothers than the girls.

**Table 1**Nature of Taboos\*

Nature of taboos	Early adolescents n = 89	Late adolescents n = 11	Adolescent girls n = 100	Early adults n = 33	Late adults n = 17	Mothers n = 50	Total Females n = 150
Dietary Restriction	89 (100%)	11 (100%)	100 (100%)	33 (100%)	17 (100%)	50 (100%)	150 (100%)
Religious Restriction	89 (100%)	11 (100%)	100 (100%)	33 (100%)	17 (100%)	50 (100%)	150 (100%)
Restriction on Physical Activities	74 (83%)	10 (91%)	82 (82%)	26 (79%)	13 (76%)	39 (78%)	121 (81%)
Restriction on Physical Hygiene	26 (29.21%)	3 (27.27%)	29 (29%)	26 (78.78%)	10 (58.82%)	36 (72%)	65 (43.33%)

\* Multiple responses

**Table 2** Dietary Restrictions during Menstruation

Food to be avoided during menstruation	Early adolescents n = 89	Late adolescents n = 11	Adolescent girls n = 100	Early adults n = 33	Late adults n = 17	Mothers n = 50	Total Females n = 150
Avoid citrus food	79 (88.76%)	10 (90.90%)	89 (89%)	25 (75.75%)	10 (58.82%)	35 (70%)	124 (82.66%)
Cold food	7 (7.86%)	1 (9.09%)	8 (8%)	8 (24.24%)	4 (23.52%)	12 (24%)	20 (13.33%)
Spicy food	3 (3.37%)	-	3 (3%)	-	3 (17.6%)	3 (6%)	6 (4%)
Total	89 100%	11 100%	100 100%	33 100%	17 100%	50 100%	150 100%

Chi square=8.60, df=4, table value= 9.49, insignificant

**Dietary Restrictions during Menstruation**

Table 2 reveals that majority sample females (82.66%) faced restriction related to intake of citrus foods during menstruation. 89% adolescent girls and 70% mothers followed this belief as it was believed that those who take citrus foods will suffer from abdominal cramps. 13.33% reported that there was a taboo on intake of cold food during menstruation, for the belief that when cold foods are taken it leads to freezing of menstrual blood leading to later problems. Only 4% faced restrictions on intake of spicy food during menstruation.

27.27% were early and late adolescents and 27.27% and 29.41% were early and late adulthood mothers. 20%, 18.66% and 17.33% females reported facing restriction related to work, exercise and play respectively. Only 19.33% sample women reported that they were no restriction on physical activity during menstruation. Out of these 16.85% and 9.09% were early and late adolescents and 21.21% and 23.52% were early and late adulthood mothers. Those activities be it related to work, play or exercise which were physically taxing and rigorous were especially to be avoided for the simple reason that it could lead to heavy menstrual bleeding and hence physical discomfort.

**Religious Restrictions during Menstruation**

**Table 3 Religious Restrictions during Menstruation\***

Religious activity to be avoided during menstruation	Early adolescents n = 89	Late adolescents n = 11	Adolescent girls n = 100	Early adults n = 33	Late adults n = 17	Mothers n = 50	Total Females n = 150
Fasting	89 (100%)	11(100%)	100(100%)	33(100%)	17(100%)	50 (100%)	150(100%)
Praying	89(100%)	11(100%)	100(100%)	33(100%)	17(100%)	50(100%)	150(100%)
Reading Quran	89(100%)	11(100%)	100(100%)	33(100%)	17(100%)	50(100%)	150(100%)
Going to mosque or shrine	89(100%)	11(100%)	100(100%)	33(100%)	17(100%)	50(100%)	150(100%)
All of the above	89(100%)	11(100%)	100(100%)	33(100%)	17(100%)	50(100%)	150(100%)

\* Multiple responses

**Table 4 Physical Restrictions during Menstruation**

Physical activity to be avoided	Early adolescents n = 89	Late adolescents n = 11	Adolescent girls n = 100	Early adults n = 33	Late adults n = 17	Mothers n = 50	Total Females n = 150
Jumping	20 (22.47%)	3 (27.27%)	23 (23%)	9 (27.27%)	5 (29.41%)	14(28%)	37(24.66%)
Exercise	19 (21.34%)	2 (18.18%)	21 (21%)	5(15.15%)	2 (11.76%)	7(14%)	28(18.66%)
Work	20(22.47%)	2 (18.18%)	22(22%)	5(15.15%)	3 (17.64%)	8(16%)	30(20%)
Playing	15 (16.85%)	2 (18.18%)	16(16%)	7(21.21%)	3 (17.64%)	10(20%)	26(17.33%)
No restriction	15 (16.85%)	1(9.09%)	18(18%)	7(21.21%)	4 (23.52%)	11(22%)	29(19.33%)
Total	89100%	11100%	100100%	33100%	17100%	50100%	150100%

Chi square=2.39, df=8, table value=15.51, insignificant

**Table 5 Restrictions Related to Physical Hygiene**

Restrictions related to physical hygiene	Early adolescents n = 89	Late adolescents n = 11	Adolescent girls n = 100	Early adults n = 33	Late adults n = 17	Mothers n = 50	Total Females n = 150
Bathing	26 (29.21%)	3(27.27%)	29(29%)	26 (78.78%)	10 (58.82%)	36(72%)	65(43.33%)
No restrictions	63 (70.78%)	8(72.72%)	71(71%)	7 (21.21%)	7 (41.17%)	14(28%)	85(56.66%)
Total	89 100%	11100%	100100%	33100%	17100%	50100%	150100%

Chi square=25.1\*, df= 2, table value= 5.99, \*significant

**Table 6 Cooking Food during Menstruation**

Cooking food during menstruation	Early adolescents n = 89	Late adolescents n = 11	Adolescent girls n = 100	Early adults n = 33	Late adults n = 17	Mothers n = 50	Total Females n = 150
Allowed	37(41.57%)	4(36.36%)	41(41%)	13 (39.39%)	2(11.76%)	15(30%)	56(37.33%)
Not allowed	52(58.42%)	7(63.63%)	59(59%)	20 (60.60%)	15(88.23%)	35(70%)	94(62.66%)
Total	89 100%	11 100%	100 100%	33 100%	17 100%	50 100%	150 100%

Chi square =1.72, df=2, table value=5.99, insignificant

Table 3 reveals that all the sample females faced restrictions related to religious activities like praying, fasting during ramzan, going to shrine, and reading Quran. Both the adolescent girls as well as their mothers pointed to the fact that following the religious practices was must for them and they could never imagine not following these restrictions.

**Physical Restrictions during Menstruation**

Table 4 indicates that majority sample females (24.66%) avoided jumping during menstruation. Out of these 22.47% and

**Restrictions related to Physical Hygiene**

Table 5 depicts that majority of sample females (56.66%) faced no restrictions related to physical hygiene. 71% of the adolescent girls and 28% of mothers reported that no restriction related to physical hygiene existed in their culture. However, 43.33% of sample females faced restriction related to bathing.

Out of these 29.21% and 27.27% were early and late adolescents and 78.78% and 58.82% were early and late adulthood mothers.

### 6Cooking Food during Menstruation

Table 6 indicates that 70% mothers as compared to 59% adolescent girls did not cook food during menstruation. Out of these 58.42% and 63.63% were early and late adolescents and 60.60% and 88.23% were early and late adulthood mothers. Overall, 62.66% of the females reported that they were not allowed to enter the kitchen during their menstrual cycle.

#### Source of Information about Taboos/Restrictions

**Table 7** Source of Information about Taboos/Restrictions

Source of information about taboos	Early adolescents		Late adolescents		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Mother	46	(51.68%)	7	(63.63%)	53	53
Sister	28	(31.46%)	1	(9.09%)	29	29
Learned it by observation	15	(16.85%)	3	(27.27%)	8	18
Total	89	100	11	100	100	100

Chi square=2.54, df=4, table value=7.78, insignificant

Table 7 reveals that for majority sample girls (53%) their mother was the primary source of information about the various menstrual taboos. Out of these 51.68% early adolescents and 63.63% late adolescents had mother as a source of information. In 29% cases it was the sister who was the source of information about taboos. Out of these 31.46% were early adolescents and 9.09% were late adolescents. 18% reported that they were not taught about these but they actually learnt these by simple observation.

#### Experience of Taboos

**Table 8** Experience of Taboos

Experience of taboos	Early adolescents n = 89	Late adolescents n = 11	Adolescent girls n = 100	Early adults n = 33	Late adults n = 17	Mothers n = 50	Total Females n = 150
Bad	-	-	-	2 (6.06%)	1 (5.88%)	3 (6%)	3 (2%)
Beneficial	77 (86.51%)	9 (18.18%)	86 (86%)	31 (93.93%)	16 (94.11%)	47 (94%)	133 (88.66%)
Harmful	9 (10.11%)	-	9 (9%)	-	-	-	9 (6%)
No effect	9 (3.37%)	2 (18.18%)	5 (5%)	-	-	-	5 (3.33%)
Total	89 100%	11 100%	100 100%	33 100%	17 100%	50 100%	150 100%

Results show that majority sample females (88.66%) reported that menstruation related taboos were beneficial. The respondents felt that these taboos are created to help in the maintenance of their health. 6% of the respondents reported that these taboos are harmful. And only 3.33% and 2% of the respondents felt that these are bad or have no effect respectively.

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Menstruation is an important physiological process in the lives of all healthy human females. Menarche signals pubertal changes which are harbingers of sexual maturity among growing females. However, in spite of the imperative role this physiological process has for females, yet there is a culture of silence associated with it. Most cultures even today continue to hold taboos and restrictions related to menstruating females. These taboos are strongly engrained in the social fabric and are

transmitted from one generation to the other (Kumar and Srivastava, 2011).

The current research was designed to analyses the existence of sociocultural taboos related to menstruation among adolescents and mothers of Muslim community of Banihal town of Jammu and Kashmir state. Widespread illiteracy and minimal outside exposure makes the community an interesting sample unit. The findings of the study revealed that adolescent girls as well as the mothers of the selected community continue to face many restrictions during their monthly periods. They are face dietary, religious, physical activity and hygiene related taboos. All grown up females during their monthly cycles are forbidden from engaging in any religious activity. Selvi and Ramachandran (2012) had also noted that menstruating women are kept away from all religious activities. The sample females are also faced with restrictions on the intake of cold, citrus and spicy food; besides being prohibited from indulging in any physically taxing/enduring activities. Bizarre hygiene practices such as being instructed to not have bath or not being allowed to cook were also still followed by some in the sample community. Patil et al (2011) in their study also found that cultural restrictions related to menstruation are largely prevalent in India even today.

The Muslims of the selected geographical locale continue to follow these taboos unabated. These taboos have been passed from older generation to the newer ones without much modification and alterations.

Mothers continue to themselves follow these taboos and in turn further, instruct their daughters also to follow these. Females of the community do not have the right to question the efficacy of these taboos and hence continue to believe that these are beneficial for them. Most of the taboos being followed do not have any scientific logic or reason but yet are followed just because they cannot be questioned. Like in many other communities, here also menstruation is visualized as unclean and unhygienic. Garg et al (2001) also found similar results on menstruation being seen as dirty.

There is a need to create awareness among community members especially among women regard taboos which are outdated and useless. Many of the taboos have lost relevance in the present time and hence can be done away with. There is a need to overcome the silence associated with menstruation, as better awareness and openness about it is required to ensure

better menstrual hygiene and health to all reproductively mature females.

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### How to cite this article:

Sarika Manhas *et al.*, A Study Of Menstrual Taboos Prevalent Among Muslim Females Of Banihal, J&K. *International Journal of Recent Scientific Research Vol. 6, Issue, 7, pp.4930-4934, July, 2015*

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