IRASS Journal of Applied Medical and Pharmaceutical Sciences
https://irasspublisher.com/journal-details/IRASSJAMPS
ISSN *(Online) 3049-0901*

EVOLUTION OF MENSTRUATION IN INDIA: A STUDY

Jammala Janaki[1*], Dr. D. Ramesh[2]

[*1]Research Scholar, Department of Anthropology, Andhra University

[2]Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, Andhra University

Corresponding Author: Jammala Janaki

Research Scholar, Department of Anthropology, Andhra University

Article History

Received: 04 / 04 / 2026

Accepted: 07 / 05 / 2026

Published: 21 / 05 / 2026

Abstract: Menstruation in India is marked by the historical and Socio-cultural transitions that have shaped the current practices. In early India, menstruation was deeply connected with spiritual, cultural, and natural cycles, often revered and celebrated in many communities. Ancient Indian societies saw menstruation not as a taboo, they saw it as a sacred biological process linked to fertility, creation, and the divine feminine. Menstrual blood was sometimes offered to goddesses, and menstruating women were treated with respect, symbolizing the powerful life-giving capacity of femininity. However, alongside reverence, menstrual taboos also emerged early on, often linked to myths and cultural beliefs. For instance, some mythologies of Hindu culture, including narratives from the Rig Veda, explain menstruation as a form of divine punishment or repentance, which laid the groundwork for associating menstruation with impurity and social restrictions. In many communities, menstruating women were isolated for practical reasons related to privacy and health. Overall, menstruation in early India was marked by a complex blend of sacred celebration, mythological interpretation, early medical understanding and protective social practices, reflecting a nuanced view of this fundamental biological process as integral to life, nature, and culture. Menstruation during the colonial period in India was shaped by a complex interplay between indigenous cultural attitudes and the imposition of British colonial norms, resulting in intensified taboos, myths, and gradual shifts in practices around menstrual health and celebration. During colonial times, these myths led to prohibitions against women entering kitchens, prayer rooms, or participating in rituals. After the colonial period menstruation practices in India underwent significant changes, influenced by social reforms, continued taboos, and increased medical awareness. Menstruation in the contemporary period in India remains a complex health, social, and cultural issue, marked by gradual improvements in awareness and hygiene, but also enduring taboos and access disparities.

Keywords: *Feminine, Menstrual taboos, Impurity, Rituals, Social practices, Social reforms, Medical Awareness, Hygiene.*

How to Cite: Janaki, J. & Ramesh, D. (2026). EVOLUTION OF MENSTRUATION IN INDIA: A STUDY. *IRASS Journal of Applied Medical and Pharmaceutical Sciences, 3(5), 23-26.*

Introduction

Menstruation is the regular, cyclical shedding of the uterine lining accompanied by vaginal bleeding, occurring in most women once a month from puberty until menopause. Menstruation refers to the discharge of blood and mucosal tissue from the uterus through the vagina, marking the first (menses) and most visible phase of the menstrual cycle. The menstrual cycle is usually 21–35 days long, with bleeding lasting between 2–8 days per cycle.This process is triggered by hormonal changes, primarily the fall of estrogen and progesterone, indicating that pregnancy has not occurred. The cycle prepares the body for potential pregnancy by thickening the uterine lining.If the released egg (ovum) is not fertilized, this lining breaks down and is shed during menstruation.Menstruation typically begins at puberty (ages 10–15, menarche) and ends with menopause (ages 45–55).Most women experience menstruation without major disruption, but symptoms like cramps, mood changes, and premenstrual syndrome (PMS) are common.Variations include painful periods (dysmenorrhea), heavy bleeding (menorrhagia), and absent periods (amenorrhea).

A comprehensive understanding of the evolution of menstrual practices in India is crucial for breaking taboos, empowering women to participate fully in society and improving public health. Menstruation in India has deep cultural and historical roots, with ancient societies sometimes viewing menstrual blood as sacred and linked to divine feminine energy. Over time, however, myths and taboos emerged, framing menstruation as impure and limiting women's dignity, freedom, and access to spaces such as temples, public areas and kitchens. Understanding this evolution helps to reveal how long-standing attitudes affect women's status and gender inequality today.

The lack of education and awareness about menstruation leads to significant health challenges, including poor menstrual hygiene, the use of unsafe absorbents and especially among rural women and girls. Many girls are deprived of education and drop out of school due to social stigma and inadequate menstrual infrastructure. Recognizing how menstrual norms have evolved informs the need for effective health education and infrastructural reforms, such as better access to restrooms and affordable sanitary products.Appreciating the changes in menstrual practices allows policymakers,educators and community leaders to design inclusive interventions that respect local cultures while dismantling stigma.

Emphasizing historical rituals that celebrate menarche or link menstruation to fertility can foster pride and empowerment, while targeted campaigns can help shift attitudes among both genders and improve quality of life for women and girls.

Modern discussions around menstruation have evolved from secrecy and shame to empowerment through sustainable products and hygiene advocacy. Understanding historical practices enables society to challenge harmful myths and highlight positive traditions, building supportive ecosystems for menstrual health. In summary, an informed perspective on menstrual evolution in India is vital for eradicating stigma, advancing public health, empowering women, and creating culturally sensitive policies that foster dignity and equality.

Vedic Period

The involvement of women in rituals during their menstruation significantly shifted from one Vedic openness to later restrictions in rituals and culturally significant goddess rituals. The Vedic texts did not record any specific restrictions or exclusions of women from rituals during their menstruation. In fact, rituals like the Agnihotri yagna(Astha Tiwari, 2020), which is considered a highly important Vedic fire ceremony, were to be performed daily by both men and women, implying that women participated regardless of their menstrual status. The Rig Veda contains a myth explaining menstruation as a transfer of guilt from Indra, the king of gods, to women after he killed the demon Vritra, who was a Brahman(Rajvi Desai, 2019). This myth framed menstruation as a monthly expiation of sin, embedding menstrual blood with complex religious significance rather than simply impurity. During the Early Vedic period they did not have temples or idols so they worshiped Gods(Indra, Agni, Varuna, Mitra, Surya) in the open places like nature. That's why women did not face the problem of temple entry during their menstruation. In the Rig Vedic era, women enjoyed high status and were active in learning and spiritual practices. Many women Rishis (seers) existed, and they had the opportunity to study Vedas and participate in religious ceremonies alongside men. Women were sometimes scholars, rulers, and administrators contributing meaningfully to culture and politics.

Post Vedic Period

The Vasishtha Dharmashastra of later Vedic period frames menstruation as a state of temporary impurity and prescribes various purity and behavioral restrictions(Nithin Sridhar,2020). It suggests that a woman is impure during her menstruation for about three days and nights, during which she should not perform certain actions like touching fire, applying collyrium, bathing, or engaging in many everyday activities. It also warns against touching certain objects or consuming certain foods during menstruation. In the Later Vedic period texts like the Manusmriti, composed post-Vedic, are much more explicit and restrictive. Manusmriti describes menstruating women as impure, mandating their isolation and forbidding their participation in religious activities during their menstruation(Superadmin, 2024). It equates menstruation with a form of pollution and imposes ritual and social restrictions such as prohibiting contact with fire, avoiding temple entry, not cooking ritual food and certain water sources. Post-Vedic texts such as the Vasishtha Dharmasutra and Angirasa Smriti(Nithin Sridhar,2020) later introduced prohibitions against menstruating women in sacred activities like homam (fire rituals), puja, temple visits, and cooking food during menstruation. According to Yajurveda Taittiriya Samhita women during their menstruation should not comb her hair, cut her nails, and anoint her eyes. Further she should not have any conjugal relationship with her husband during her menstruation. In the Shathapatha Brahmana belonging to Yajurveda, explains menstrual blood is a manifestation of a portion of Indra's guilt for slaying a Brahmin, symbolizing a transfer of sin. And also associating menstruation with danger, impurity, and social segregation. From the later Vedic period onwards, women's status declined due to rising patriarchal norms and social restrictions like child marriage, polygamy, sati,and the purdah system. Texts like Manu Smriti dictated women's dependence on male relatives through their lives. Women's roles became largely centered around domestic duties and upholding family honor, with reduced public participation. Noblewomen practiced purdah, and widows faced social stigmatization.

Festivals Related To Menstruation

Agnihotri Yagna: An important Vedic fire ritual performed daily by both men and women without restrictions on menstruation, implying menstrual women participated fully(Acharya M R Rajesh,2015). Yoni Puja: A tantric ritual worshipping the female Yoni as a cosmic source of creation, performed specifically when a woman is menstruating, celebrating menstruation as sacred and powerful. Menstrual blood is considered pure and a direct representation of the cosmos in this ritual. Festivals celebrating goddess menstruation: Such as the Ambubachi Festival(Shreya Garg,2025) in Kamakhya temple, Assam, The Thriputharattu Festival at the Bhagavathi temple in Kerala, and the Raja Prabha Festival in Puri Jagannatha Swami temple, Odisha,where the goddess's menstrual cycle is ritually observed and celebrated with rest, seclusion, bathing, and elaborate ceremonies. Women participating in these festivals honor menstruation as a natural, sacred process. Thus, while classical Vedic texts themselves do not name specific menstruation-inclusive rituals, traditional and tantric practices coupled with goddess festivals embrace menstruation as sacred and include menstruating women in ritual worship.

Colonial Period

During the colonial period in India, menstruation became a site of contested meanings, regulatory interventions, and intersecting indigenous and colonial ideologies. British colonial authorities and missionaries arrived in India with their own religious and patriarchal views about menstruation, often rooted in Victorian ideas of shame, bodily purity, and gender roles. Many were astonished to observe Indian communities in which menstruation was sometimes celebrated through rituals, as in Kerala's Thirandu kalyanam or kunji kalyanam ceremony, challenging colonial concepts of domesticity and womanhood. Missionaries and colonial administrators viewed such ceremonies as unsanitary or backward and sought to regulate or discourage them. Caste, Religion, Indigenous Practices, and Menstrual taboos were long present in India before colonial rule and often intertwined with local caste and religious hierarchies. High-caste Hindu beliefs, sometimes similar to British views, often cast menstruation as polluting, reinforcing restrictions on women's mobility and participation in ritual life. However, not all groups shared these views; traditions such as in Assam and Orissa involved veneration or celebration of a menstruating goddess, and Sikhism generally rejected menstrual-based exclusion. The British colonial regime brought with it Victorian ideals that perceived menstruation as biologically and morally polluting, reinforcing

Indian taboos by merging them with new Western scientific and medical discourses(Amisha K Gopee,2024). Colonial missionaries, authorities, and reformers often codified and systematized menstrual taboos through hygiene programs and public health(Sujata Mukherjee,2017). These interventions aligned with upper-caste and patriarchal values, strengthening existing restrictions and normalizing the idea of seclusion during menstruation.

Post Colonial Period

In postcolonial India menstruation has remained a complex interplay of cultural taboos, evolving hygiene practices, social reform movements, and persistent inequalities with significant changes emerging since independence but many challenges persisting into the present. Menstruation in postcolonial India is marked by progress—rising hygienic product use, breaking taboos, and activist interventions—but persistent educational, structural, and cultural barriers ensure the issue remains deeply contested and evolving. Menstrual oppression cannot be solely attributed to colonial influence; Brahminical and patriarchal norms have long reinforced stigmatized views, especially among privileged castes. Practices and taboos are both regional and religion-specific, with some areas (like Punjab with Sikhism's rejection of caste) showing more progressive attitudes, while others exhibit entrenched restrictions. Period discourse in postcolonial India thus reflects an ongoing negotiation between precolonial beliefs, colonial legacies, and modern reforms. After 1947, India saw gradual improvements in menstrual hygiene, especially following policy interventions like the Menstrual Hygiene Scheme (2011), which expanded affordable access to sanitary pads in many states. Sanitary napkin usage has grown substantially in recent years: by 2019-21, 77.6% of young women used hygienic methods—up from about 57% in 2015-16, with sharpest gains among the poorest and marginalized groups. Yet cloth and homemade alternatives remain common, particularly in rural areas and among low-income populations. Menstrual cups and tampons are known but rarely adopted due to lack of awareness and persistent misconceptions.

Contemporary Period

Menstruation in contemporary India is defined by a challenging intersection of cultural stigma, ongoing activism, technological advances in menstrual hygiene, and evolving government policies, but many structural inequities and taboos continue, especially for marginalized groups. Menstruation continues to be enshrouded in stigma and myth in many communities. Menstruators are often excluded from religious activities and public life during their periods, reflecting entrenched beliefs of impurity rooted in both religious and historical precedents. These exclusionary practices manifest in restrictions around praying, cooking, attending school, or entering places of worship, with considerable variation across regions and castes. Sanitary pads are the most widely used product (about 78–87%), while modern alternatives such as tampons and menstrual cups are only adopted by about less than 5% due to factors like safety fears, cost, and stigma. Government and NGO interventions increasingly advocate for improved access and eco-friendly products, but waste management and affordability remain major barriers. Menstrual activism in India now addresses both resource gaps and rights through education campaigns, pad distribution drives, and efforts to break taboos in rural and urban areas. The government's Menstrual Hygiene Scheme and related policies have given importance to menstrual health, expanded product availability, and, in some states like Kerala, introduced menstrual leave for students to promote gender-just practices. Period poverty—insufficient access to products and sanitation—continues to prevent many young girls from attending school, impacting long-term education and opportunities, especially in low-income, rural and tribal areas. Menstrual disorders, poor hygienic conditions due to lack of products, and social anxiety about leaks and stains significantly affect the mental and physical well-being of Indian menstruators. The ongoing need is to transform menstruation from a stigmatized topic into a matter of public, inclusive concern, with continued advocacy for societal and policy change.

Conclusion

In the Vedic period, menstruation was not overtly stigmatized—texts like Rigveda and social norms offered women relative equality and even described some menstrual practices as auspicious. Rituals like the Ambubachi Mela which is celebrated at the kamakhya temple in Guwahati of Assam, reflect the celebration of feminine fertility and the recognition of menstrual cycles as sacred and vital to life. The story of Indra and Vritra—framed menstrual blood as a vehicle for guilt and sin. During the post Vedic period texts like Vasistha Dharmashastra and Manusmriti explained women should not participate in the social and religious activities, cooking food, bathing, and comb hair during their menstruation. The colonial period amplified silence and taboo around menstruation, pushing women to the margins of social life and cementing exclusionary practices. From the late 19th century to the present, the introduction of commercial sanitary products and activism marked gradual change, but exclusion from social and religious spaces, stigma, and misinformation remain strong, especially in rural and marginalized communities. Menstruation in India evolved from being perceived as a source of power and celebration to a condition burdened by taboo, with mythology, socio-political change, and colonial influence playing key roles. Contemporary India is witnessing a slow but steady move toward menstrual equity and open discussion, aiming to restore dignity and scientific understanding to menstrual health, though social change is still ongoing.

References

1. Janhawi, Ankita Singh and Priya Sharma (2025). A study on Indian women and their perspective on Menstruation. DOI: https://www.doi.org/10.22271/allresearch.2025.v11.i3e.12443
2. PIB Bhubaneswar (2025). Driving Menstrual Equity: IIT Bhubaneswar Hosts Transformative Conclave on Menstrual Health & Hygiene.
3. Sourav Biswas, Asraful Alam, Nazrul Islam, Ranjan Roy, & Lakshminarayan Satpati (2024). Understanding period product use among young women in rural and urban India from a geospatial perspective.
4. Ahuja, P., & Singh, N. (2022). Sustainable menstrual products: The challenges ahead. Asian Journal of Women's Studies, 28(3), 397–411. https://doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2022.2098896
5. Douglas M (2002) Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo. New York.

6. Becknuss, K. (2022). The female stigma: Menstruation attitudes in the women's liberation movement. AWE (A Woman's Experience), 8(13), 88-113.

7. Astha Tiwari (2020). Comparing the text of Manusmriti and Vedas on Menstruation

8. Nithin Sridhar (2020). Hindu View of Menstruation Part 3: Menstruation as a Period of Rest and Sacred Celebration

9. Rajvi Desai. (2019). From Riches to Raga: The Evolution of Menstrual Taboos India.

10. Sinu Joseph (2017). In Search of The Menstruating Goddess

11. Kaur G (2015) Banished for menstruating: The Indian women isolated while they bleed. The Guardian.

12. Suneela Garj, Tanu Anand (2015). Menstruation related myths in India: Strategies for combating it. Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care

13. Garg S, Anand T (2015) Menstruation related myths in In-dia: strategies for combating it. J Family Med Prim Care 4: 184-186.

14. Crawford M, Lauren M, Kaufman RM (2014) This is a natural process: Managing menstrual stigma in Nepal. Cult

15. Buckley Thomas, Alma Gottlieb (1988) Blood Magic: The anthropology of menstruation. University of California Press. Hyatt L (2014) Menstruation matters: How periods are keeping girls out of school in Nepal.

16. Bhartiya, A. (2013). Menstruation, religion and society. International Journal of Social Science and Humanity, 3(6), 523–27.

17. Boosey R, Wilson E (2013) A vicious cycle of silence: What are the implications of the menstruation taboo for the fulfill-ment of women and girls' human rights and, to what extent is the menstruation taboo addressed by international human rights law and human rights bodies?

18. Health Sex 16: 426-439.Yagnik, A.S. (2013). Reframing Menstruation in India: Metamorphosis of the Menstrual Taboo with the Changing Media Coverage. Health Care for Women International.

19. Bobel Chris (2008) New blood: Third-Wave feminism and the politics of menstruation.

20. Rutgers University Press. Joshi D, Fawcett B (2001) Water, hindu mythology and an unequal social order in India.Das, Mitoo. (2008). Menstruation as Pollution: Taboos in Simlitola, Assam. Indian Anthropologist, 38(2), 29-42.

21. Chanana, Karuna. (2001). Hinduism and Female Sexuality: Social Control and Education of Girls in India.

22. Sociological Bulletin, 50(1), 37-63. Bulbeck, C. (1998). Re-orienting Western Feminisms: Women & Diversity in a Postcolonial World. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

23. Bordo, S. (1993). Unbearable weight: Feminism, Western culture, and the body. University of California Press.