

MENSTRUATION

Menstruation is a vexed subject with tomes of anthropological studies done on it. Most cultures in the world regard menstruation as “unclean” and have various taboos relating to the process. In this Hindus are not unique.

The Bible has very clear views about it. In the Torah (Leviticus 15:19) we find God commanding:—

“When a woman has her regular flow of blood, the impurity of her monthly period will last seven days, and anyone who touches her will be unclean till evening.”

Thus even in Judaism a menstruating woman is considered ritually unclean, and both touching her, touching an object she had sat or lied on, and having intercourse with her also makes a person ritually unclean. The extent to which these rules are observed in modern Judaism varies depending on the degree of conservatism/orthodox.

In Islam, a woman is not allowed to offer prayer or to perform other religious activities like Fasting or circumambulating the Kaaba etc. Sexual intercourse is strictly prohibited during menstrual periods. However, she can perform all other acts of social life as normal. According to authentic traditions, Prophet Muhammad encouraged menstruating women to come to be present at festive religious services for the two Eid holidays even though they were excused from praying. Some scholars believe that the Muslim teachings of this Taboo has fueled the prohibition of women as imams in the Muslim religion. They cite that Sharia Law has maintained this prohibition due to "ritual uncleanness."

An 1981 survey showed that a substantial majority of U.S. adults and adolescents believed that it is socially unacceptable to discuss menstruation, especially in mixed company. Many believed that it is unacceptable to discuss menstruation even within the family!

Even in modern TV advertising there is a taboo regarding graphic portrayals of menstruation. One common way that even sanitary-product advertising avoids mentioning menstruation is by pouring a *blue* liquid on the sanitary product to demonstrate its absorptiveness. This shows the stigma surrounding the blood associated with menstruation. The invention of the tampon may have been inspired by the taboo, as tampons are more "discreet." Further evidence of the taboo is the creation of a variety of euphemisms for menstruation, including "Aunt Flo", "on the rag", or even “the curse.”

Hindus tend to view menstruation, especially first menstruation or [menarche](#), as a positive aspect of a girl's life — even though it is associated with ritual “IMPURITY”. In South India, girls who experience their menstrual period for the first time are given presents and celebrations to mark this special occasion. However, most of the Hindu girls refrain from visiting temples during their cycle. Also in orthodox families, the menstruating women are asked to stay away from domestic activities for a period of 4 days, indirectly a form of rest during the blood loss period. Even physical intimacy is prohibited.

In the old days women had a separate room to stay in, separate plates and tumblers, and they were forbidden from entering the kitchen or the puja room. Women who are into skilled activities like singing, tailoring or the like, do not touch their tools for these three days. They are not allowed to touch anyone as well. Any festival or occasion that comes during the woman's cycle out of the house, is negotiated discretely. On the third day, after the woman has a complete bath, she is considered pure and may resume her routine.

However, it is today practiced only in South India and Brahmin families. North Indians claim to be modern and disregard these age old ideals.

The Practical Reasons for “impurity”.

All margins of the body and matter issuing from them are considered polluting — hair, nails, spittle, blood, semen, urine, feces and tears. Human bodies in the act and process of producing these bodily secretions or associating with these matters are also regarded as polluting. The presence of active bleeding as in menstruation, although polluting is also considered as auspicious.

Oily exudations, semen, blood, urine, mucus, ear-wax, phlegm, tears and sweat are the impurities of the body. After urinating or passing faeces the organs should be washed with water. And afterwards one should sip water [*ācamanam*]. (Manu 5;135,136.)

A person is considered pure only after he has washed away the remnants of urine and faeces after voiding, the remnants of the food after eating, the vessels used the day before, and the traces of semen after intercourse. He should wash his hands and feet and perform *ācamanam*. (Āpastambha 1;5;15.)

Scriptural Sources.

Prohibitions regarding women's involvement in ritualistic worship during their menstrual cycle are implied throughout the scripture.

The Bhagavata Purana for example attributes the menstrual cycle to one fourth the karmic reaction to Indra's inadvertent killing of a brahmana. According to that Purana, Indra killed a brahmana and was then chased by the karmic reaction to this killing. He then negotiated with four groups who each agreed to absorb one quarter of the reaction in exchange for a blessing. Women got the blessing that they could have sex during pregnancy without endangering the embryo in exchange for accepting the monthly menstrual cycle.

The negative aspects of menstruation in the Hindu religious context must be balanced against the positive aspects as well.

Men are considered as perpetually unclean and need to bathe everyday and to perform *sandhya-vandana* in order to maintain their ritual cleanliness. Women on the other hand are considered perpetually PURE except during the 3 days of their period!!

During her period a woman was given complete rest from all domestic work and chores. In traditional agrarian societies the women work 7 days a week from dawn to dusk without respite, drawing water from wells and rivers kilometers from the house, chopping wood, cooking, washing, caring for children etc. Would 4 days of complete rest not be welcome under these circumstances?

Purity of Women

*Striyaḥ pavitram atulam naitā duṣyanti karhicit |
Māsi masi rajo hyāsāṃ duṣkṛtānya-pakarṣati ||*

Women [posses] an unequalled means of purification; they never become entirely tainted. For month by month their temporary uncleanliness removes their sins. (Vasistha 28:4)

The Moon god has blessed women with purity; the Gandharva has blessed them with sweet speech. Fire is always pure and women are always pure. (G.P.95;19 Yajñavalkya 3:19)

Only the father may be considered as fallen but never the mother. (Narada Purana 14:18)

A woman is not defiled by a lover, (*na stri dusyati jarena*) nor a Brahmin by Vedic rites, nor water by urine and faeces nor fire by consuming [impure substances]. A wife [thought] tainted by offense, whether she be quarrelsome, or have left the house, or have suffered rape, or have fallen into the hands of thieves, must not be abandoned; to forsake her is not prescribed [by the sacred law]. Let him [her husband] wait until the time of her menstruation, by her temporary impurity she becomes pure. (Vasistha 28:1-3)

Women in their menses become impure again due to mutual touch. The brahmin women becomes pure after three days, the kshatriya woman after two days, the Vaishya woman after fasting for one day and the Shudra woman after taking a bath. (Garuda Purana 1:222:41- 42)

Ayurveda & Menstruation

Seeking deeper Eastern insights on menstrual therapies, Hinduism Today interviewed two of America's foremost Ayurvedic experts. Ayurveda is the major traditional system of health in India, dealing with the body's ailments in a much different way than Western medicine. Their answers are a bit technical, but if understood may help women to understand what is happening with their bodies and thus cope intelligently with these natural forces. We spoke first with Dr. Deva Maharaji, Ph.D. He is a doctor of Ayurveda and Homeopathic Medicine and founder of the Deva Foundation, 565 East Channel Road, in Santa Monica, California, which specializes in counseling, self-healing and tantric research. We then spoke with Dr. Robert Svoboda who was filling in at Dr. Vasant Lad's Ayurvedic Institute in Sante Fe, New Mexico:

Dr. Maharaji: PMS is a big problem in the U.S. It is perfectly suited for treatment by Ayurveda since that science relates psychological and physical imbalances and consciousness. It is not pathological as Western [medicine] which deals with symptoms.

Basically, there are imbalance in the three doshas [movement, metabolism and structure]. There are several practical ways to regain natural balance. Herbs help. Herbs strengthen tissue, promote regularity. For example, tamarind can be taken against constipation in a chutney or tea - about 2 spoons a day. Gota kola tea (about 1/2-teaspoon) taken in the morning for 3-4 days will detoxify the lymphatic system. Lassi is good, add a little black pepper. Aloe vera tea can be taken in the morning for 1-2 days, with a little pepper again, to regulate body temperature and stabilize the cycle.

Diet is important, Stress should be on taking more yin (feminine) foods, and fewer yang items. So, more rice, less wheat, more yogurt/buttermilk, less milk, more melons and broccolli. People don't understand about milk. Used properly, adding a bit of dried ginger or cayenne, it will not cause mucous.

Yoga asanas can help to balance the solar and lunar forces, too, and thus reduce PMS symptoms. The cobra posture is good, so is alternate breathing. Remember that this all relates to the planets' forces. What is outside is inside. There are other means in Ayurveda, too, through use of metals. Yogananda practiced this. Copper helps control edginess, common during menstruation. There are tantric rings of 3 and 5 metals - gold, silver, copper, brass and iron - which control different things. Also stones - agates help receptivity.

Dr. Robert Svoboda: —

One reason that women live longer than men is that their blood gets purified each month. Ayurveda defines three waste products. Dietary wastes are removed through feces and urine, and fat is

removed through sweat. Food is converted into seven Dhātus or tissues through fire - first into blood and then six kinds of flesh. At each stage some wastes are generated through metabolism. Every month a woman body purifies the blood, adjusting for any imbalances...It is the apana vayu which controls the throwing out of these wastes. This is very beneficial and makes it easier for her to be physically healthy than for a man.

The monthly hormonal-emotional cycle involves all three doshas. Ideally, this was supposed to take place over the new moon time. Once her flow ends, fertility would peak around full moon. This was considered the ideal time to conceive - especially since the moon represents the mind. At that time, both male and female *samskaras* are optimal to pass on to a child.

As far as recommendations, we suggest women eat light, warm things with some fats. Yoga āsanās are designed to move the apana up in the body, which is basically the last thing you want to do during the period, hence yoga practitioners need to perform appropriate āsanās. Domestic and social work is [traditionally] stopped, since the woman's real work was to purify herself during that time.

Menstruation Mantra

anādi-madhyāntam ajam purāṇam rajasvalā deva-varam namāmi |
(varaha purāṇa 152:10)

A menstruating woman should always recite this mantra before partaking of food – if need be, she can do any work or activity or even religious acts if she recites this mantra. (Varāha Purāṇa 152: 8-10)

Preferably she should avoid cooking or coming in contact with the deity or paraphernalia or performing pūjā but if it is unavoidable for some reason then this mantra enables her to do anything.