



# Socio-Cultural Belief and Practices Related to Menarche and Menstruation among Tribals of Kargil, J&K

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## ABSTRACT

The present study was carried out with an objective to assess the socio-cultural beliefs and restrictions related to menarche and adolescent menstruation and to perceive the intergenerational continuity and transition in the menstrual knowledge and practices of sample tribal females. The sample for the study consisted of 320 adolescents girls in the age group of 14 to 18 yr studying in class 9th to 12th currently enrolled at Govt Middle, High and High Secondary schools, 100 mothers and 100 grandmothers, which were selected equally from Purig tribe and Balti tribe of Kargil district, J&K state. Interview schedule, Checklist and focus group discussion were used to collect the required information from the respondents. The results reveal that females of Kargil especially mothers and grandmothers hold and follow certain specific beliefs related to menstruation. Majority of them believed that menstruation symbolizes psychological and physical maturity for females. It was commonly believed that bathing during menstruation caused cessation/stoppage of menstrual blood. Bathing during their period is also prohibited because it is seen to contaminate the body. Other beliefs held include cutting of hair/nails during period leading to contamination of body; disposal of used sanitary materials by burning or burying leads to infertility. The findings indicate that these beliefs were comparatively more popular among mothers and grandmothers as compared to young girls. The younger generation had more relevant information, which they probably gained through schools, books (science books) /and media. It is recommended that girls should be educated about the truth of menstruation, its physiological implications and about maintenance of adequate hygiene during menstruation.

**Key Words:** Beliefs, Kargil, Menstruation, Restrictions and Tribal.

## INTRODUCTION

The socio-cultural practices of a society are what makes it unique and what gives it an identity. Medically, the starting of a girl's menstruation marks her change from a child to an adult, as it is an important transition but the cultural/religious practices decide its construction for a given society. Different cultures treat menarche in different ways. Some cultures visualize menarche as a crucial time in a girl's life and commemorate it in order to greet the girl in to the world of adulthood while other cultures consider menarche as just an unimportant physical occurrence. Menstruation also has a long history of strict cultural beliefs across India, which

causes real harm. In some tribes women are forced to live in a cowshed throughout their periods. There are health issues, like infections caused by using dirty rags, and horror stories related to it (George, 2012). Women of varying cultures follow different beliefs and myths related to menstruation without having any actual evidence because nobody ever dared to take a chance and get suspicious about these. Menstrual blood in primitive times was considered highly powerful and strong. It was used in many rituals and especially in making magic potions (Joseph, 2014). Many communities world over have gone through centuries of myths and taboos that have created an ideology of the female body

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which has continued to impact the lives of women and girls in modern society. Religious teachings, traditional practices and cultural beliefs, have all played their role in the ideology of stigmatizing the menstruating woman. Sadly such myths have led to 48 per cent of girls in Iran, 10 per cent in India, and 7 per cent in Afghanistan believing that menstruation is a disease, it is the removal of bad blood from the body, rather than a natural and healthy part of adolescence or young adulthood (SOS Children's Village, 2014). Hence, the present study explored the socio-cultural beliefs and practices related to menarche and menstruation among tribes of Kargil, Ladakh.

## MATERIALS AND METHOS

The sample for the study comprised of 520 tribal respondents of Kargil district, which was divided into 3 groups. The core group of the study comprised of 320 unmarried adolescent girls in the age group of 14-18yr, who were selected in equal numbers from Balti and Purig tribe. The entire group of selected girls was currently enrolled in high and higher secondary schools of the district. The 2<sup>nd</sup> group consisted of 100 mothers (50 from Purig tribe and 50 from Balti tribe) who had at least one adolescent daughter, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> group consisted of 100 grandmothers (50 from Purig tribe and 50 from Balti tribe) who had at least one adolescent granddaughter experiencing menstruation, drawn equally from the two tribes. The tools used for data collection included: Interview, Checklist method, and Focus Group. The data were analyzed through content analysis and statistical techniques using SPSS 16.0 version.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Between both the selected tribes i.e., Purig and Balti, it was noted that menstruation is largely seen as a private affair to be kept secret from others especially the males. Menarche or the onset of menstruation was a crucial step towards maturity and adulthood but no specific ceremonies or activities commemorating it were practiced.

Beliefs associated with menstruation were however practiced and followed by all women folk.

### Some of the prominent and commonly held beliefs were as under Bathing During Menstruation Leads to Cessation of Menstrual Flow

*There is no scientific evidence to prove that bathing can lead to cessation of menstrual flow*

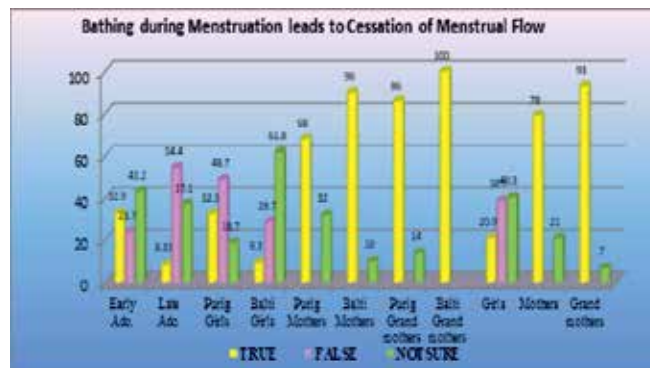


Fig: 1

Results on this belief in the fig. no 1 reveal that majority (40.3%) of the girls were unsure about this belief; 38.7 percent did not believe on this statement; and only 20.9 percent of girls believed on this statement. However contrary to the girls, majority of both mothers (79%) and grandmothers (93%) believed that bathing during menstruation caused cessation/stoppage of menstrual blood. They thought that bathing exposed the body to cold, and the blood which would otherwise flow out from the uterus remains there or freezes in the uterus and hence this could cause cessation of menstrual flow.

Comparatively younger generation girls regarded this statement as untrue but none of mothers and grandmothers felt this was untrue. It was evident that there was highly significant difference across the three generation ( $p=000$ ) on this belief. Most (32.4%) early adolescent girls said this belief was true where as majority of late adolescent girls (54.4%) considered it as a false belief. This implies that as the adolescent girls aged they probably realized that bathing has no effect on menstrual flow. Tribe wise analysis show that more

## Socio-Cultural Belief and Practices

mothers and grandmothers of Balti tribe considered it as true than Purig tribe females. However, more Balti adolescent girls were 'not sure' about this belief while most Purig girls felt this as 'false'.

### Bathing during Menstruation leads to Contamination/ Impurity of Body

**Fact: Taking a bath/shower/washing the body during menstruation is necessary. It prevents a woman from getting infections. However, the practice of 'douching' (forcing water inside the vagina in order to clean it) can cause pelvic infections.**

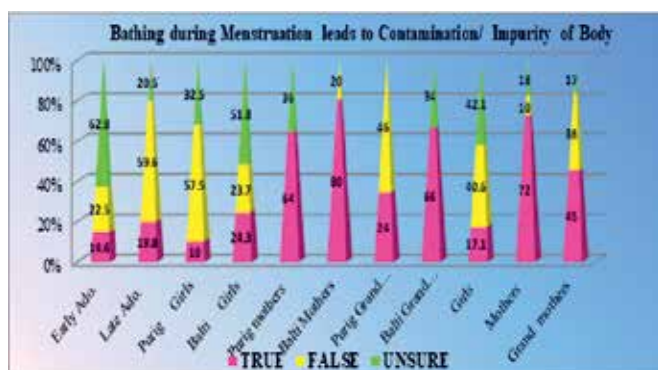


Fig: 2

Data in the fig. no 2 show that majority of the sample mothers (72%) and grandmother (45%) believed that by bathing during menstruation the body will become more impure or contaminated, as the legs and hands will come in contact with menstrual blood. Since the blood is supposed to be dirty and contaminated, hence when it touches other body parts, they also become unclean and dirty. Only 17.1 percent of girls thought that it was true as these girls were directed by the elder females of their family to believe in this. However, majority of adolescent girls (42.1%) were not sure about this belief and another 40.6 percent of girls reported it to be a false belief, 10 percent mothers and 38 percent grandmothers also did not find any logic behind this belief and hence regarded this belief as false. 18 percent mothers and 17 percent grandmothers were also not sure about this belief. Across the two age group of the sample girls, majority (62.8%) early adolescent girls were not sure about this

belief, while, majority (59.6%) late adolescent girls thought that it was an incorrect belief. Statistically also there was significant difference between the two groups of adolescents. Only 14.6 percent early adolescent girls and 19.8 percent late adolescent girls believed this belief to be true. Tribe wise analysis shows that more Balti respondents (24.3% girls, 80% mothers and 66% grandmothers) believed on this statement than Purig respondents (10% girls, 64% mothers and 24% grandmothers). On the other hand, more of the Purig respondents (57.5% girls and 46% grandmothers) viewed this statement as false compared to Balti (23.7% girls and 20% mothers) respondents. Statistical analysis also shows that there was highly significant difference across the three generation ( $p=000$ ); between early adolescent girls and late adolescent girls and between the tribes in all the three groups with respect to this particular belief.

### Eating Cold Food during Periods Causes Cramps and Eating Hot Food during Menstruation Helps in Early Cleansing of the Uterus

**Facts: It is totally fine to eat cold food. Cramps usually come from the uterus and these cramps are due to uterine contractions; a normal physiological manifestation of periods. One should in fact consume balanced diet during menstruation**

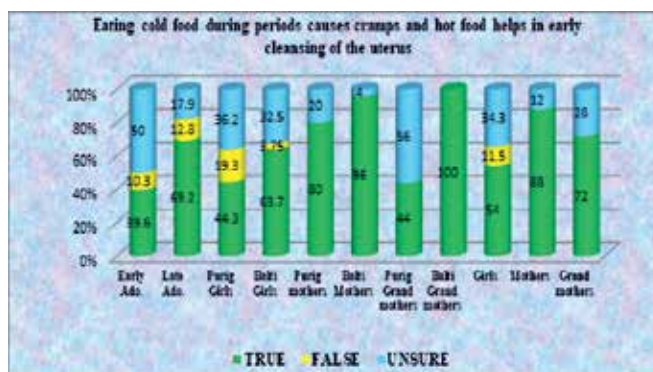


Fig: 3

Fig. no 3 represents that majority mothers (88%) and grandmothers (72%) and adolescent girls (54%), believed that eating cold/sour foods during period can cause abdominal and vaginal cramps. Those who considered this as true, further stated that sour food like curd, buttermilk, wild apricot

(Chuli), lemon, juices are cold in nature so these may cause freezing of menstrual blood in the uterus and finally lead to cramps. While eating hot food during menstruation helps in early cleansing or expelling out the menstrual blood from the uterus. Those respondents believed that by intake of hot food, menstrual blood comes out timely, which also helps in easing menstrual pain and cramps. The data also show that 11.5% of girls as compared to none of the mothers and grandmothers reported this as untrue, highlighting a slight better understanding of the menstrual process among the young girls. Calculation of chi-square revealed more variation in the response of the girls, as many of them either felt that this belief was untrue or were not sure of its authenticity than the mothers and grandmothers. Those respondents who belonged to 'not sure' category reported that they heard about this belief through some sources but they were not confident whether this belief is true or false. Statistically significant difference was found among the two groups of adolescent girls. Most late adolescent girls (69.2%) believed it as true but on the contrary majority early adolescent girls (50%) were not sure about this belief. On the basis of tribe, Balti respondents were more likely to believe on this statement than Purig respondents and further this trend continued for all the three generations.

**Sex during Periods is a Great Sin**

*Fact: If both partners are willing, there is no medical reason not to.*

**Sex during Periods is a Great Sin**

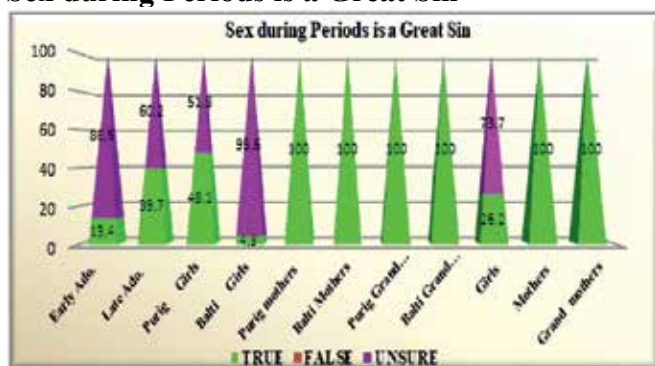


Fig: 4

Another commonly held belief among females of Kargil district was that sex during menstruation is a great sin. Fig. no 4 clearly shows that all the mothers and grandmothers firmly held this belief. But the younger girls probably because of inexperience were not sure about the authenticity of this belief. The elder females reported that religiously they were also instructed not to indulge in sex during periods and hence they never questioned this and have followed it unconditionally when they got married. Comparatively more late adolescent girls believed it as a correct belief than early adolescent girls probably because as the girls aged their views were more likely to be influenced by those of their mothers and grandmothers. Irrespective of their tribal affiliation all mothers and grandmothers believed in this concept of sex as a sin during menstruation. However, for girls, more Purig tribe girls held this belief as true than Balti girls.

**Cutting of Hair / Nails during Periods Causes Contamination of Body**

*Fact: A girl can cut her hair and nails during her period as usual.*

Another prevalent belief among the tribals was related to the cutting of hair and nails during the menstrual flow. Majority mothers (50%) and grandmothers (65%) believed that cutting of hair or nails during their monthly cycle causes contamination of body. They further added that if a female cut her hair or nail during periods than the remaining or leftover hair or nails will also become impure. However, majority (59.3%) of the girls either thought that it is an erroneous belief or (34.6%) were not sure about this belief. This highlights that with passage of time such beliefs were losing faith among the younger generation as they did not find any logic in these. Majority (51.2%) early adolescent girls were not sure about this belief and 40.2% thought that it was a false belief; similarly majority (79.4%) late adolescent felt this was untrue and 17.3% were not sure about this belief. This indicates that adolescent girls mostly did not consider it to be true. Tribe wise more Balti

**Table 1 Disposal of Used Sanitary Materials by Burning Leads to Infertility**

Response	Purig		Balti		Early Ado.	Late Ado.	Girls		Mothers		Grandmothers		Females		
	14-16 Yr N=77	16-18 Yr N=83	14-16 Yr N=87	16-18 Yr N=73	14-16 Yr N=164	16-18 Years N=156	Purig N=160	Balti N=160	Purig N=50	Balti N=50	Purig N=50	Balti N=50	Girls N=320	Mothers N=100	Grand mothers N=100
True	- (5.1)	4 (5.1)	8 (8.2)	11 (15)	8 (4.8)	15 (9.6)	4 (2.5)	19 (11.8)	18 (36)	42 (84)	25 (50)	10 (20)	23 (7.1)	60 (60)	35 (35)
False	36 (46.7)	66 (85.7)	2 (2.2)	22 (30.1)	38 (23.1)	88 (56.4)	102 (63.7)	24 (15)	12 (24)	-	-	34 (68)	126 (39.3)	12 (12)	34 (34)
Not sure	41 (53.2)	13 (15.6)	77 (88.5)	40 (54.7)	118 (71.9)	53 (33.9)	54 (33.7)	117 (73.1)	20 (40)	8 (16)	25 (50)	6 (12)	171 (53.4)	28 (28)	31 (31)
	Chi-sq between early and late adolescent girls 46.5**, P=0.000, df=2						Chi-sq between Purig & Balti girls 81.2**, p=0.000, df=2		Chi-sq between Purig & Balti grandmothers 26.7**, p=0.000, df=2		Chi-sq between Purig & Balti grandmothers 52**, p=0.000, df=2		Chi-sq across generation =135**, p=0.000 df=4		

**Table No. 2 Ones whose Blood-Stained Clothes are Seen by Others is a Great Sinner**

Response	Purig		Balti		Early Ado.	Late Ado.	Girls		Mothers		Grandmothers		Females		
	14-16 Yr N=77	16-18 Yr N=83	14-16 Yr N=87	16-18 Yr N=73	14-16 Yr N=164	16-18 Yr N=156	Purig N=160	Balti N=160	Purig N=50	Balti N=50	Purig N=50	Balti N=50	Girls N=320	Mothers N=100	Grand mothers N=100
True	57 (74.0)	46 (59.7)	22 (25.2)	73 (100)	79 (48.1)	119 (76.2)	103 (64.3)	95 (59.3)	50 (100)	50 (100)	50 (100)	50 (100)	198 (61.8)	100 (100)	100 (100)
False	-	34 (44.1)	-	-	34 (20.7)	-	34 (21.2)	-	-	-	-	-	34 (10.5)	-	-
Not sure	20 (25.9)	3 (3.8)	65 (74.7)	-	85 (51.8)	3 (1.9)	23 (14.3)	65 (40.6)	-	-	-	-	88 (27.5)	-	-
	Chi-sq between early and late adolescent girls 106**, P=0.000, df=2						Chi-sq between girls 54.3 **, p=0.000, df=2		-		-		Chi-sq between three generations =93.6**, p=0.000 df=4		



grandmothers (80%) and mothers (76%) considered this belief as true than their Purig counterparts.

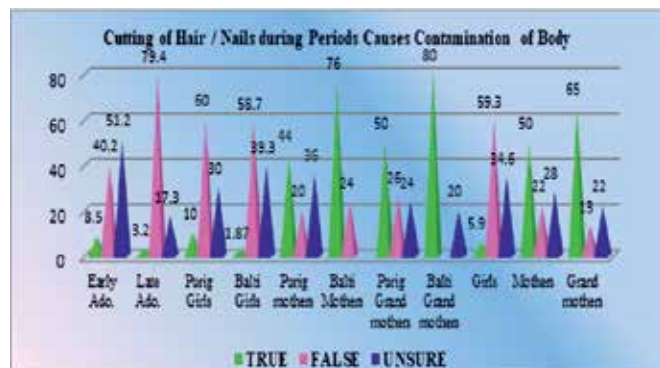


Fig: 5

### Disposal of Used Sanitary Materials by Burning Leads to Infertility

**Fact: Disposal of used sanitary materials by burning or burying is a safe and hygienic method.**

Another belief held by females of Kargil was that ‘disposal of used sanitary materials by burning leads to infertility’. The data (Table No. 1) clearly depict that, across the three generation it were the mothers (60%) that mainly followed this belief. Majority (53.4%) of the adolescent girls were uncertain about this or (39.3%) felt it was not true. These girls reported that even though they saw their mothers and grandmothers following this belief but they themselves didn’t understand whether it was true or not. As far as the sample grandmothers were concerned almost equal number reported it was true (35%), untrue (34%) and not sure (31%). This was the only belief where the grandmothers themselves seemed confused and unclear. Tribe wise Balti girls and Balti mothers were more likely to follow this belief than Purig girls and Purig mothers but for grandmothers a reverse trend was noted. Statistically highly significant difference was found between the early adolescent girls and late adolescent girls and intra group differences according to tribe.

### Ones whose Blood-Stained Clothes are Seen by others is a Great Sinner

**Fact: Menstrual blood is the same as blood from anywhere else in the body, so there is no sin on seeing blood-stained clothes.**

All mothers (100%) and grandmothers (100%) held the belief that Women must hide menstrual protective product/material because other than awkwardness ones whose blood-stained clothes are seen by others is a great sinner. This trend remained same for both the tribes. 61.8 percent of the girls also believed in this concept. This shows that younger generation are also likely to believe this as true. Among the selected tribes it was commonly believed that all menstrual material should be hidden especially the blood stained clothes. Any female not doing so was claimed to be committing a sin and could be cursed. The fear of curse and concept of sin made the females follow this belief without questioning. Similar kind of belief was also followed in Tanzania, that if a menstrual cloth is seen by others, the owner of the cloth may be cursed (House et al., 2012). Comparatively, here more late adolescent girls than the younger ones believed in this. Also, Purig girls were more likely to follow this than the Balti girls.

### Strenuous / Laborious Activity Causes More Blood Flow during Menstruation

**Fact: Exercise can help with symptoms; it will not make pain worse. Women are not weaker during their periods, unless they have anemia, which is caused by an abnormal loss of blood during menstruation.**

Females were considered weak and vulnerable during menstruation and hence it was believed that strenuous/laborious activities can cause more menstrual flow. Majority of the females across the three generation (50% girls, 86% mothers and 55% grandmothers) however did not approve of this belief. Rather they felt that since they had to work hard throughout the year, their performance was not affected by the occurrence or non occurrence of this physiological phenomenon.

However, it was found that there was highly significant difference across the three generations, with more girls being more uncertain but more grandmothers approving of this belief. 45 percent of the grandmothers had allegiance to this belief,

**Table No. 3 Strenuous / Laborious Activity causes more Blood Flow during Menstruation**

Response	Purig		Balti		Early Ado.	Late Ado	Girls		Mothers		Grandmothers		Females		
	14-16 Yr N=77	16-18 Yr N=83	14-16 Yr N=87	16-18 Yr N=73	14-16 Yr N= 164	16-18 Yr N=156	Purig N=160	Balti N=160	Purig N=50	Balti N=50	Purig N=50	Balti N=50	Girls N=320	Mothers N=100	Grand mothers N=100
True	16 (20.7)	14 (18.1)	-	1 (1.3)	16 (9.7)	15 (9.6)	30 (18.7)	1 (0.6)	-	-	-	45 (90)	31 (9.6)	-	45 (45)
False	24 (31.1)	42 (54.5)	30 (34.4)	64 (87.6)	54 (32.9)	106 (67.9)	66 (41.2)	94 (58.75)	46 (46)	40 (40)	50 (100)	5 (10)	160 (50)	86 (86)	55 (55)
Not sure	37 (48)	27 (32.5)	57 (65.5)	8 (10.9)	94 (57.3)	35 (22.4)	64 (40)	65 (40.6)	4 (4)	10 (10)	-	-	129 (40.3)	14 (14)	-
	Chi-sq between early and late adolescent girls 43.7** , P=0.000, df=2						Chi-sq between Purig & Balti girls 32.0** p=0.000, df=2		Chi-sq between Purig & Balti grandmothers 2.99, p=0.083, df=1		Chi-sq between Purig & Balti grandmothers 78.2**, p= 0.000, df=1		Yates chi-sq across generation =153.5**, p=0.000, df=4		

as they felt that during their time living conditions were very hard and therefore they suffered from heavy blood flow. As far as the adolescent girls were concerned, majority (57.3%) early adolescent girls were uncertain about this belief where as majority (67.9%) late adolescent girls viewed this as a false belief. Inter tribe significant difference for girls and grandmothers were noted, with more Purig girls reporting this belief as true while more grandmothers of Balti tribe considered this belief as true.

### CONCLUSION

All these beliefs highlight the notion of menstrual blood as being dirty or contaminating. Menstruation is also associated with maturity and fertility but again the concept of sin or curse is also associated with those who do not hide menstruation and menstrual material from others. These signify that in a way the menstrual beliefs and myths are a means of controlling not only the minds and bodies of females but also their behavior and everyday life. Everything that a female does or thinks is controlled by these customary beliefs. The females of Kargil continue to be so strongly influenced by these socio-cultural beliefs/myths and taboos/restrictions that they dislike the entire process of menstruation itself. Deviation from the practical and believed norms is not allowed and in fact, never thought about mainly because of the fear of social alienation and fear of religious curse. Women across different age groups continue to silently follow. The older generation of females especially the grandmothers and mothers have diligently followed

these believe. However, many young sample adolescent girls either thought of these beliefs as erroneous or were not sure about the authenticity or practical viability of these beliefs. Young girls probably owing to their education or media influences find many of these beliefs and myths outdated and objectionable. Between the two tribes, it was found that more Balti grandmothers and mothers confirm to various beliefs and myths associated with menstruation. Among the girls however, no major differences were noted according to their tribe.

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