



Perception and Adaptability of Adolescent girls with Existing Socio-Cultural Menstrual Beliefs and Myths in Kargil

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ABSTRACT

Each culture has myths and beliefs about menstruation. These beliefs exist in different forms in different cultures. In most societies, menarche is an indication of sexual maturity in a girl. However, a substantial body of literature suggests that menarche and menstruation are mainly negatively perceived and experienced by girls. The study aims to identify perception and adaptability of adolescent girls with existing socio-cultural menstrual beliefs and myths in Kargil. The sample has been drawn from 2 blocks namely. Kargil and Sankoo blocks. The study comprised of 320 unmarried adolescent girls 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 tools used for data collection included: Interview, Checklist method, and Focus Group Discussion. The data were analyzed through content analysis and statistical techniques using SPSS 16.0 version. The findings highlight that the lives of these tribal females continued to be influenced by the cultural and religious construction. Majority tribal adolescent girls continued to follow many of the menstrual beliefs and myths. They especially avoided applying of henna during menstruation and followed the practice of hiding menstrual clothes and protective products. Disposal of all menstrual material was still done in complete secrecy and beliefs related to this were held as true. This all shows that the young adolescent girls have modified some of the beliefs but continue to feel the presence of many other beliefs/myths. Menstruation though intrinsic to them happens to be bound by many specific menstrual beliefs and myths. Though they desire to abandon many of these but fear of social rejection and loss of family prestige hinders them to leave these beliefs and myths.

Key Words: Adolescent girls, menstruation, beliefs, myths.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a stage that has been marked as a special phase in every girl's life cycle that requires specific and special care and attention. This period is marked with onset of menarche. Although menstruation is a natural process but it is often connected with several misconception, perceptions and practices, which sometimes result in poor health outcomes. Several communities world over have gone through centuries of myths and taboos that have created an ideology of the female body which has continued to impact the lives of women and

girls in modern society. Many of these norms and practices involve perceptions of menstrual blood as being dirty and polluting, associated with restrictive practices and stigma such as shaming and social exclusion for women during menstruation (Thakur *et al*, 2014; Sommer *et al*, 2015; Mohamed *et al*, 2018). Studies have found significant associations between cultural beliefs and practices and the impact on women's MHH. However, the extent of the impact of these beliefs and practices on women's ability to manage MHH are contextual and varied (Hennegan *et al*, 2019). There is a need for more

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context specific understanding of socio-cultural norms, beliefs and practices about menarche and menstruation to understand how best to address women's menstrual health and well being. Societal, environmental, interpersonal and personal factors impact on the experiences of girls and women around menstruation. Of these four factors, socio-cultural norms, beliefs and practices appear to be extremely important underlying determinants that require locally-relevant action. (Maulingin *et al*, 2022). Keeping all the aforementioned data in mind, the current account endeavors to study some of the common menstrual beliefs and taboos faced by the females of Purig and Balti tribe of Kargil and their adaptability towards those existing menstrual beliefs and myth.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Ladakh is divided into two main districts Leh and Kargil. Kargil District is situated at a distance of 205 Kms from Srinagar and 230 Kms from Leh. Kargil district comprises of nine blocks namely Sankoo, Chiktan, Shargol, Tesuru, G.M Pure, Zanskar, Drass, and Kargil. The sample for the study has been drawn from 2 blocks namely Kargil and Sankoo blocks. 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 tools used for data collection included: Interview, Checklist method, and Focus Group Discussion. The data were analyzed through content analysis and statistical techniques using SPSS 16.0 version.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of data revealed that many menstrual beliefs and myths exist among both Purig and Balti tribal women of Kargil. Given these two tribes' common religious foundation and similar geographical inhabitation, there were very few differences in their menstrual conceptualization. Both the tribes followed more and less same beliefs

and myths related to menarche and menstruation.

The young adolescent girls (14-18 yr) of both the tribes were contacted to infer from them the common beliefs and myths associated with menstruation. Further, the sample girls were also required to specify whether they completely or partially follow or did not follow these beliefs and myths. This was done to evaluate whether there has been any deviation in following of these socio-cultural constructs related to menstruation among the current generation of adolescent girls. The older generation mothers narrated that during their times it was unthinkable to even violate any of these taboos/myths/beliefs and strict adherence was ensured. However, it would be interesting to note the view point of the today's adolescent girls in this regard, since many of these constructs lack a scientific and logical presumption. The present research evaluates the perception of young female population of Kargil towards these.

To facilitate a clear understanding of girls' perception and adaptability towards the menstrual beliefs and myth; the results are as under:

Practically Applicable Menstrual Beliefs and Myths

Many of the menstrual beliefs and myths required the females to practically perform certain activities. Specific activities such as their bathing habits, food intake, use and disposal of menstrual material could be evaluated in terms of their being impacted by the existing beliefs and myths. The current section deals with girls perceptions of practically applicable or viable menstrual beliefs and myths.

i) Avoid Daily Bathing and Hair Washing During Menstruation

The data clearly show that majority (52.8%) of the girls (71.8% girls from Purig tribe and 33.7% girls from Balti tribe) did not follow the belief that one should avoid daily bathing and hair washing during menstruation. 29% of girls (16.8% girls from Purig tribe and 41.2% girls from Balti tribe)

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Table 1. Avoid Daily Bathing and Hair Washing During Menstruation.

Category	Purig Girls		Balti Girls		Girls		
	14-16 Yr N=77	16-18 Yr N=83	14-16 Yr N=87	16-18 Yr N=73	Purig N=160	Balti N=160	Total N=320
Completely follow	6 (7.7)	12 (15.5)	40 (45.9)	0	18 (11.2)	40 (25)	58 (18.1)
Partially follow	23 (29.8)	4 (4.8)	26 (29.8)	40 (54.7)	27 (16.8)	66 (41.2)	93 (29)
Do not follow	48 (62.3)	67 (80.7)	21 (24.1)	33 (45.2)	115 (71.8)	54 (33.7)	169 (52.8)
Chi-sq between Purig& Balti tribe girls 46.7**, P=0, df=2							

reported to partially follow this belief. Some of these girls acknowledged that “our mothers used to say that one should avoid bathing during menstruation, but we do not completely follow this belief because during peak summer season it is very hot and bathing becomes a necessity for cleanliness and cooling of body”. Few girls also reported that “Every Monday we have a cleanliness check-up at assembly time in school; so sometimes bathing also becomes compulsory even during periods. In practice, we haven’t found anything wrong with this, so we don’t follow this practice”. Only 18.1% girls (11.2% from Purig tribe and 25% girls from Balti tribe) reported to completely follow this belief.

It was also evident that comparatively more Purig tribe girls did not follow this belief than the Balti tribe girls. Those who followed this belief felt that it was good for them, as during winter

season it is beneficial for them not to bath, as Kargil witnesses extreme winter season. The data clearly indicate that majority of young generation girls did not completely follow the existing beliefs and myths related to bathing during menstruation, they did not accept that “Bathing during menstruation leads to cessation of menstrual flow”, “Bathing during menstruation leads to contamination/ impurity of body” and “Washing hair during periods increases the menstrual flow”. They did not blindly follow these beliefs and myths, but rather had modified these to suit themselves. Further found that highly significant difference was found between them (P=0**) as more of Purig tribe girls did not follow this belief practically than Balti tribe girls.

ii) Believes and Myths connected with Diet/food

A number of beliefs/ myths centre on diet and food intake during menstruation.

Table 2. Avoid Eating Certain Foods while Having Periods .

Category	Purig Girls		Balti Girls		Girls		
	14-16 Yr N=77	16-18 Yr N=83	14-16 Yr N=87	16-18 Yr N=73	Purig N=160	Balti N=160	Total N=320
Completely follow	4 (5.1)	2 (2.5)	0	0	6 (3.75)	0	6 (1.8)
Partially follow	21 (27.2)	20 (25.9)	8 (9.1)	4 (5.4)	41 (25.6)	12 (7.5)	53 (16.5)
Do not follow	52 (67.5)	61 (73.4)	79 (90.8)	69 (94.5)	113 (70.6)	148 (92.5)	261 (81.5)
Chi-sq between Purig girls & Balti girls, tribe wise 26.56**,p=0.00, df=2							

a) Avoid Eating Certain Foods while Having Periods.

Majority (81.5%) of the sample girls (70.6% girls from Purig tribe and 46.2% girls from Balti tribe) did not believe in following dietary restriction during periods. These girls reported that they don't care about such practices and don't think that food has any effect on menstruation. These girls reported that their mothers told them what to eat and what to avoid eating during menstruation but there was no strict adherence to this within their homes.

The other 16.5% of girls (25.6% girls from Purig tribe and 7.5% girls from Balti tribe) partially followed this belief. Tribe wise affiliation shows major difference between Purig girls and Balti girls on this belief, as more Purig tribe girls did not follow this belief than the Balti tribe girls. Statistical analysis also shows highly significant difference between them. Only a few girls from Purig tribe completely followed the dietary beliefs.

(b) Restriction on Consumption of Dairy Products

Restrictions on consumption of dairy products like butter, milk and curd during periods were not practically followed by majority, 98.7% (97.5% girls from Purig tribe and 100% girls from Balti tribe) of the girls. Only 4 girls from Purig tribe partially followed this belief practically. These girls reported that since dairy product are so easily accessible, so they naturally find a place in their diet even during menstruation.

Statistically, no significant difference was found between the girls of two tribes as majority of girls from both the tribes did not follow this belief practically.

(c) Avoid Drinking Cold Things while Having Periods

Likewise, avoiding of drinking cold things like chilled water, juices and cold drinks is also not practically followed by 93.4% (87.5% girls from Purig tribe 99.3% girls from Balti tribe) of the girls. They further reported that "we heard about this from our elder females but we do not follow this practice in everyday life". Tribe wise analysis shows that a higher percent of Balti tribe girls did not like to follow the belief that one should avoid eating drinking cold liquids while having periods than Purig tribe girls. Chi-square value also shows highly significant difference between them.

(d) Intake of Hot Food During Menstruation

Eating of hot food during menstruation was also not followed practically by majority [87.1%] (75% girls from Purig tribe and 98.7% girls from Balti tribe) of the respondents. These girls reported that during periods nobody is concerned about the menstruating girl, so nobody prepares any special food for her. Whatever is cooked for all, she will have to eat that food as well. Hence, unavailability of such foods is a major reason behind its non consumption in regular diet. 13.7% and 5.9% girls from Kargil partially and completely followed this belief respectively, as they found some truth in this

Table 3. Restriction on Consumption of Dairy Products.

Categories	Purig Girls		Balti Girls		Girls		
	14-16 Yr N=77	16-18 Yr N=83	14-16 Yr N=87	16-18 Yr N=73	Purig N=160	Balti N=160	Total N=320
Completely follow	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Partially follow	2 (2.5)	2 (2.5)	0	0	4 (2.5)	0	4 (1.25)
Do not follow	75 (97.4)	81 (97.5)	87 (100)	73 (100)	156 (97.5)	160 (100)	316 (98.7)
Chi-sq between Purig girls & Balti girls, 4.05, p=0.044							

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Table 4. Avoiding Drinking Cold Things while Having Periods.

Category	Purig Girls		Balti Girls		Girls		
	14-16 Yr N=77	16-18 Yr N=83	14-16 Yr N=87	16-18 Yr N=73	Purig N=160	Balti N=160	Total N=320
Completely follow	6 (7.7)	2 (2.5)	0	0	8 (5)	0	8 (2.5)
Partially follow	6 (7.7)	6 (7.7)	1 (1.1)	-	12 (7.5)	1 (0.6)	13 (4.0)
Do not follow	65 (84.4)	75 (90.3)	86 (98.8)	73 (100)	140 (87.5)	159 (99.3)	299 (93.4)
Chi-sq between Purig girls & Balti girls, tribe wise 18.51**, p= 0.00, df=2							

Table 5. Intake of Hot Food during Menstruation

Category	Purig Girls		Balti Girls		Girls		
	14-16 Yr N=77	16-18 Yr N=83	14-16 Yr N=87	16-18 Yr N=73	Purig N=160	Balti N=160	Total N=320
Completely follow	17 (22.0)	0	2 (2.2)	-	17 (10.6)	2 (1.2)	19 (5.9)
Partially follow	-	22 (28.5)	-	-	22 (13.7)	-	22 (6.8)
Do not follow	60 (77.9)	61 (73.4)	85 (97.7)	73 (100)	121 (75.6)	158 (98.7)	279 (87.1)
Chi-sq between Purig girls & Balti girls, 38.74**, p= 0, df=2							

belief. They reported that they preferred to take hot food during periods only when they have menstrual cramps or when their periods are delayed.

Statistical analysis again shows highly significant difference between the two tribes as more Balti tribe girls did not follow the practice of consuming hot foods during periods practically than Purig tribe girls.

The entire account reveals that dietary beliefs and myths were mostly not followed in practice by the girls. Concepts of hot and cold foods are fast losing their value among some tribals girls of Kargil at least.

iii) Avoid Strenuous Activity During Menstruation

One commonly held belief among the tribal girls of Kargil was related to strenuous physical

activity by a menstruating female. It was widely believed that when a girl/woman is undergoing her menstrual cycle, she should avoid performing any strenuous activity, as the female is seen to be low in energy and such activities tend to increase the menstrual flow. 98% (12.5% Purig & 6.8% Balti girls) of the girls had found this belief true (refer table number no. 33), however as far as its following was concerned, none of the girls actually followed it. The girls reported that they cannot change their daily activities just because they are menstruating. They had no other option but to carry on with their daily routine activities. These girls also felt that participation in physically strenuous activity does not lead to any menstrual discomfort. Probably their harsh living condition made the girls think that the physical performance does not get affected by menstrual flow.

Table 6. Avoid Strenuous Activity during Menstruation

Categories	Purig Girls		Balti Girls		Girls		
	14-16 Yr N=77	16-18 Yr N=83	14-16 Yr N=87	16-18 Yr N=73	Purig N=160	Balti N=160	Total N=320
Completely follow	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Partially follow	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Do not follow	77 (100)	83 (100)	87 (100)	73 (100)	160 (100)	160 (100)	320 (100)

iv) Do not touch Rice/Wheat Storage Container

Another prevalent belief in the community was that touching the storage containers of cereals like rice or wheat by a menstruating female will destroy it. It was hence suggested that a menstruating female should not touch any cereal storage container/s. However, the results show that none of the current generation adolescent girls followed this in practice. The girls did not find any logic behind this and hence said that if required they went ahead and touched the storage containers. The girls also reported that their grandmother and sometimes their mothers also instructed them against this but; there was no strict enforcement of this belief at their home. If required a girls irrespective of her menstrual status could touch the rice containers.

v) Avoid Cutting Their Hair or Nails During Periods.

Another held belief among the tribals of Kargil pertains to not cutting off nails or hair during menstruation. This was partially followed by only 5% of girls who were from Purig tribe only. However, majority (95%) girls i.e. 90% girls from

Purig tribe and 100 % girls from Balti tribe did not follow this belief. Many of the girls reported not knowing about prevalence of this belief; they reported that their mothers had not told them about this.

vi) Believes and Myths related to Disposal of Used Menstrual/ Sanitary Material

Disposal of used menstrual protective material saw the existence of many beliefs and specific customs. Since, the menstrual blood is considered contaminated and something not to be visible to others, probably the disposal of such material was done in complete secrecy and seclusion. All the sample girls reported that they did not dispose the used material by burning because it is not considered socially appropriate. The common myth that burning of such material will lead to infertility was considered correct by these girls and hence they never burnt such material ever. On the other hand, majority of the girls (92.5%) disposed the used material in a fresh water river, but that too after proper washing of the same. Only 7.5% of the girls did not follow this, as they said that it was not

Table 7. Do not touch Rice/Wheat storage container.

Category	Purig Girls		Balti Girls		Girls		
	14-16 Yr N=77	16-18 Yr N=83	14-16 Yr N=87	16-18 Yr N=73	Purig N=160	Balti N=160	Total N=320
Completely follow	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Partially follow	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Do not follow	77 (100)	83 (100)	87 (100)	73 (100)	160 (100)	160 (100)	320 (100)

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Table 8. Avoid Cutting their Hair or Nails during Period

Category	Purig Girls		Balti Girls		Girls		
	14-16 Yr N=77	16-18 Yr N=83	14-16 Yr N=87	16-18 Yr N=73	Purig N=160	Balti N=160	Total N=320
Completely follow	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Partially follow	12 (15.5)	4 (4.8)	0	0	16 (10)	0	16 (5)
Do not follow	65 (84.4)	79 (95.1)	87 (100)	73 (100)	144 (90)	160 (100)	304 (95)

always convenient to go to the river to dispose off the used sanitary material. The sample adolescent girls of the selected tribes threw their used material in the dustbin or if required dug them into the earth. The results highlight that the girls of Kargil haven't altered this practice of disposal of used menstrual material to a greater extent. Like their mothers and grandmothers they also continued to dispose off the material in a flowing river away from the eyes of others. At least on these beliefs, the age old

traditions continue to be followed by even young adolescent girls.

vii) Avoiding Application of Henna (Mehandi) during Menstruation

As far as the belief related to avoiding application of Henna (Mehandi) during menstruation was concerned, majority girls (61.8%) reported to follow this practice. They were of the view that menstruation signifies that a girl has contaminated and polluted body and hence if 'henna' is applied

Table 9. Beliefs and Myths Related to Disposal of Used Menstrual/ Sanitary Material

Beliefs/Myths	Categories	Purig Girls		Balti Girls		Girls		
		14-16 Yr N=77	16-18 Yr N=83	14-16 Yr N=87	16-18 Yr N=73	Purig N=160	Balti N=160	Total N=320
Avoid disposing used materials by burning	Completely follow	77 (100)	83 (100)	87 (100)	73 (100)	160 (100)	160 (100)	320 (100)
	Partially follow	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Do not follow	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Disposing the used material in river	Completely follow	73 (94.8)	77 (92.7)	80 (91.9)	66 (90.4)	150 (93.7)	146 (91.2)	296 (92.5)
	Partially follow	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Do not follow	4 (5.1)	6 (7.2)	7 (8.0)	7 (9.5)	10 (6.2)	14 (8.7)	24 (7.5)
Chi-square between Purig and Balti girls=0.22, p=0.63, df=1								
Dispose the used material in river after proper washing	Completely follow	56 (72.7)	41 (49.3)	67 (77)	42 (57.5)	97 (60.6)	109 (68.1)	206 (64.3)
	Partially follow	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Do not follow	21 (27.2)	42 (50.6)	20 (22.9)	31 (42.4)	63 (39.3)	51 (31.8)	114 (35.6)
Chi-square between Purig and Balti girls=0.66, p=0.41, df=1								

Table 10. Avoiding Application of Henna (Mehandi) during Menstruation

Category	Purig Girls		Balti Girls		Girls		
	14-16 Yr N=77	16-18 Yr N=83	14-16 Yr N=87	16-18 Yr N=73	Purig N=160	Balti N=160	Total N=320
Completely follow	57 (74.0)	46 (59.7)	22 (25.2)	73 (100)	103 (64.3)	95 (59.3)	198 (61.8)
Partially follow	0	4 (4.8)	0	0	4 (2.5)	0	4 (1.2)
Do not follow	20 (25.9)	33 (39.7)	65 (74.7)	0	53 (33.1)	65 (40.6)	118 (36.8)
Chi-sq between Purig girls & Balti girls, tribe wise 5.54, p= 0.06, df=2							

during this time, then their body will continue to remain polluted until the color of henna fades away. However, another substantial number of respondents i.e. 36.8% (33.1% girls from Purig tribe and 40.6 % girls from Balti tribe) of girls did not follow this belief. These girls reported that “we heard about this belief but we are hardly bothered to follow this practice and apply henna whenever we want”. Tribe wise affiliation shows no significant difference between the girls of Purig tribe and Balti tribe.

viii) Hide Menstrual Clothes and Protection Products or be Cursed

Belief on public hiding of menstrual cloths and protection products was practically followed by majority 61.8% (64.3% girls from Purig tribe and 59.3 % girls from Balti tribe) of the girls because these respondents were of the notion that those who see such cloths, especially if blood-stained, will

be cursed and naturally nobody wants to be cursed without committing any sin. As a result many girls felt compelled to follow this belief. However, 38.1% (35.6% girls from Purig tribe and 40.6 % girls from Balti tribe) of girls did not follow this belief as they don’t find any logic behind this belief and they are very sure that it is just a myth and there may be some folk story behind this belief. On the basis of tribes no significant difference was found between them as majority of girls from both tribes completely followed this belief.

ix) Restriction on Sharing Blanket, Eating Together, and Walking Over Baby Clothes during Menstruation

Last but not least, there are some others beliefs such as: Avoid sharing same blanket with menstruating women; Avoid eating together or sharing food on same plate with menstruating women, and Avoid crossing or walking over any

Table 11. Hide Menstrual Clothes and Protection Products or be cursed

Categories	Purig Girls		Balti Girls		Girls		
	14-16 Yr N=77	16-18 Yr N=83	14-16 Yr N=87	16-18 Yr N=73	Purig N=160	Balti N=160	Total N=320
Completely follow	57 (74.0)	46 (59.7)	22 (25.2)	73 (100)	103 (64.3)	95 (59.3)	198 (61.8)
Partially follow	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Do not follow	20 (25.9)	37 (44.5)	65 (74.7)	-	57 (35.6)	65 (40.6)	122 (38.1)
Chi-sq between Purig girls & Balti girls, tribe wise 0.84, p= 0.35, df=1							

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Table 12. Restriction on Sharing Blanket, Eating Together, and Walking Over Baby clothes during Menstruation

Beliefs/myths	Categories	Purig Girls		Balti Girls		Girls		
		14-16 Yr N=77	16-18 Yr N=83	14-16 Yr N=87	16-18 Yr N=73	Purig N=160	Balti N=160	Total N=320
Avoid sharing same blanket with menstruating women	Completely follow	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Partially follow	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Do not follow	77 (100)	83 (100)	87 (100)	73 (100)	160 (100)	160 (100)	320 (100)
Avoid eating together on same plate with menstruating women	Completely follow	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Partially follow	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Do not follow	77 (100)	83 (100)	87 (100)	73 (100)	160 (100)	160 (100)	320 (100)
Avoid crossing or walking over any baby cloths	Completely follow	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Partially follow	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Do not follow	77 (100)	83 (100)	87 (100)	73 (100)	160 (100)	160 (100)	320 (100)

baby clothes. These beliefs were prevalent among the older generation females of Kargil but such beliefs are no longer practically followed by young girls. Even majority of young adolescent girls were not familiar with these beliefs and were astonished to even hear about such beliefs.

CONCLUSION

It is concluded that majority tribal adolescent girls continued to follow many of the menstrual beliefs and myths. They especially avoided applying of henna during menstruation and followed the practice of hiding menstrual clothes and protective products. Disposal of all menstrual material was still done in complete secrecy and beliefs related to this were held as true. This all showed that the young adolescent girls have modified some of the beliefs but continue to feel the presence of many other beliefs/myths. Menstruation though intrinsic to them happens to be bound by many specific menstrual beliefs and myths. Though they desire to abandon many of these but fear of social rejection and loss of family prestige hinders them to leave these beliefs and myths.

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