Menstruation and the practices, women follow during menarche has always been a complicated and diplomatic matter in India. Social beliefs and cultural taboos of different societies of India restrict women and bound them to all the sufferings they faced or will be facing. In the name of human made beliefs and irrational taboos females are brought up to accept these easily, follow them throughout their lives and pass them on to their next generation. This paper discusses about the social, cultural and religious practices during menstruation in the present era of development due to the backwardness in the thinking of our society which makes women feel filthy and ashamed for menstruating. I have tried to bring forth the disrespecting behaviour of men and women and their stereotypical thinking towards menstruating females, which is very common. The use of secondary data has been made for the same. The unawareness among girls regarding menarche, sexuality and hormonal changes has been targeted to find out the reason behind the vulnerable cases I found. The behavioural change in the youth towards menses and the maintenance of health and hygiene can only be stimulated through education and social guidance.

**Keywords**: Education, Health, Hygiene, Impurity, Menarche, Menstruation, Taboo.

**Introduction**

When I was in class V, I heard a girl bleeding badly in the school and she got stains all over her skirt. I was curious to know what had happened to her suddenly. The whole day passed but my curiosity wasn't answered. Later, that week a meeting was conducted where only girls of our class were called and asked to come with our respective mothers the next day. It was on that day I came to know about menstrual cycle and the hormonal changes that teenagers have during menarche. Thanks to our school who took initiative to aware girls about it at right time so that the incident does not repeat with any other girl. But later there were many changes I felt within me during my teenage time about which I wasn't told by anyone and about which I also was initially confused with cancer and other illness, as in childhood we related bleeding with serious diseases like cancer. I didn't feel comfortable to talk about these changes I was going through initially even with my mother. But at a point I asked my mother about the changes I was going through and then she told me that all these are just natural changes which every teenage girl goes through.
through. It takes a lot of courage for a small girl who knows nothing about the hormonal and physical changes, to talk about these internal changes. So when I discussed it with my friends, I came to know that they too were initially confused regarding these changes with illness and cancer. I really wonder about the rural area, as how the girls in rural area know about it. Do they also suffer the same way that the girl went through in my school? Whom do they ask to clear their queries and doubts?

Majority of girls go through similar situations as discussed, where they came to know about menses after they attained menarche. Even after attaining menarche they are vulnerable to detailed knowledge of it. There might be a good number of girls who aren’t aware of Pre Menstrual Syndrome (PMS). Lack of education is the major reason behind the vulnerable situation of females in rural as well as in urban areas. Moreover, the cultural and religious belief regarding menstruation plays an oppressive role in female’s life. It’s like society has built a tradition to which every female has to follow their whole life without even thinking of the actual relevance or reason behind those beliefs. They do not have anyone to clear their doubts even within the family or in the larger society. The only difference to their condition can be brought through education. It is the only source by which a girl can find true answers to every query related to menstruation, hygiene maintenance, physical and hormonal changes (Spanier, 1978).

**Literature review**

According to Assamese culture and norms, on the onset of menarche, a girl is kept in confinement in a room for seven days and made to survive only on milk products, sprouts and fruits. Taboos include not viewing men, not combing her hair, not to visit prayer place, not cutting nails or reading books. Also married women are not allowed to sleep with their husbands due to fear of the husband getting some incurable ailment (Das, 2015).

According to a survey done in Gujarat (India) by Tiwari, Oza and Tiwari (2006), it was found that one third of the teenage girls were not informed about menarche before its onset and approx 50% of the girls felt they were not mentally prepared for the same. Vulnerability among girls prevails more due to lack of health education in schools and colleges. They concluded that “the girl’s psychological reactions to menarche are the result of a complex interplay of biological, psychological and social influences” (Tiwari, Oza & Tiwari, 2006). Though the girls went to school but still had
limited education about menses. Although education about menarche has come a long way but still only a few schools and colleges are successful in providing it positively.

Due to lack of knowledge & prevailing customs, women started accepting the things as told to them by the society, their mothers or the near ones. Most of the women believe menarche to be impure and so they prefer to isolate themselves from their routine and basic necessities. According to Hoerster, Chrisler & Rose (2003), Indian women are more positive towards menstruation as compared to American women. They also say that the negative information is presented as neutral or positive information although it is available in the form of stereotypes about women’s behaviour during various phases of the menstrual cycle. The authors also find the positive attitude of the Indian women towards social and religious restrictions out of the ordinary and criticize by saying that these restrictions were less likely to adhere to university educated women. The preparation for menarche is not detailed and communicated to girls before the first menarche and also about the health issues (Hoerster, Chrisler & Rose, 2003).

Education for girls has been a matter of concern and project for various government and non-government organisations for a long time. But still we have areas where education of girls is given no importance. These girls remain prohibited from the importance of health education and hygiene. They follow the cultural taboos without assessment and consummate it as a part of their life. Some of the girls who do have courage to study further are sequel as victim of society beliefs and taboos, as in most rural areas menstruating girls are not allowed to go school because of orthodox mentality. Lack of health education leads to improper hygiene maintenance (Paria, Bhattacharyya, & Das, 2014). Also the cultural and religious taboos made by society make their life vulnerable.

Problems faced by a menstruating female

Every girl in her initial phase of hormonal changes i.e. during teenage, encounter many problems in accepting the changes, physically and emotionally. At the same time she also has to sustain the social changes befalling around her. Like, people start counseling what to do and what not, where to go and where not to go, what to eat and what not to, what to wear and what not, mostly from eldest person of the family which usually are annoying especially during menstruation. Also, during that time of the month, girls are not allowed to enter the kitchen as they'll induce impurity. They are not allowed to go to a
common area or to come in front of guests to serve. In most of the Indian houses women are restricted from touching sour things like pickles or their consumption (Puri & Kapoor, 2006). Also, females are restricted to enter holy places which are also followed in different religions as they will bring impurity (Kumar & Srivastava, 2011). In some customs, the first menses of a girl is celebrated as per their culture but at the same time women who are menstruating are asked not to partake in any rituals as they are considered filthy and impure (Dharmalingam, 1994). From the very first menstrual cycle itself girls are being told how to live their lives, what to do during menses and what not to, which they get accustomed. But when education is incorporated through schools and then through higher education, series of question surrounds social ideologies like why, what, how, etc. They question the taboos and beliefs regarding menstrual cycle which they practice from the day it starts.

Indian society is a developing society where women still can’t speak or discuss about a natural process like menstruation openly. Girls cannot share their misery with their father or any male member as their up-bringing is done in such way (Baldwin & Baranoski, 1990). Women in general have to use code words like mahina, happy birthday, mahawari, down etc. in public places and even at home. In urban areas, some of the educated people have brought changes in their thinking regarding menstruation and parented a healthy environment where girls could share their problems with their fathers including menstruation. But the rural areas are worst as they have heaps of myths and taboos. In some of the rural areas, girls are asked to live in a dark room leaving all basic facilities like bed, new clothes, light, etc at that time of the month and are made to sleep on sand (Greenhalgh & Doucleff, 2015). They have to use a piece of cloth and recycle it for further use. Almost every woman believes not to wash the head in the first two days of menstruation. It’s become a tradition which every menstruating girl has to follow her whole life (Mythri Speaks, 2015).

**Consequences and Causes**

Menstruation is a crucial biological process of a female’s body for reproduction. Being a female living in Indian society one cannot decide whether menstruation is a perk or punch for women. If we talk to a girl of the middle class family living in Indian society, she will call it a punch because of all the stupid beliefs and taboos she is asked to live with after she gets her first menstruation cycle. Society has propagated a frame for women which she must not cut across. She doesn’t have the right to live her life she wants and in case anyone
out dare to live on her own beliefs and terms, she is disrespected, abused and boycotted by the society. Lack of education among girls is a major notion behind the existence of such beliefs. Secondly, the parents-adolescent communication gap related to menstruation and sexuality, which can also be the reason behind the narrow thought process of society (Diiorio, Kelley, & Hockenberry-Eaton, 1999). Our society is very conservative and channelizes old beliefs, where girls don’t feel to open up their problems. Only a few girls are aware about menstruation and premenstrual syndrome before they attain menarche and in that also, very few know about the hormonal and physical changes. In a study done by Paria, Bhattacharyya, & Das (2014), it was found that only 37.52% girls were aware of menstruation before attainment of menarche in West Bengal and it was somewhat same for other parts of India. And regarding awareness of menstruation and hygiene practices, it was significantly high in urban areas as compared to the rural areas which effects women health (Paria, Bhattacharyya, & Das, 2014). Heavy flow of blood during first two days is the reason for girls to be an anaemic. They need to have proper diet during and after menstruation so that their body can have required nutrients and make up for the blood loss (Garg & Anand, 2015). The harsh effects can be seen after marriage in reproduction and also in old age, as women’s bones become weak after an age and they suffer from severe joint pains. The social and cultural beliefs regarding menstruation are another reason behind the improper hygienic habits among girls. During menstruation girls are not allowed to move outside as well as inside the house (kitchen, common area). They have to stay in one room generally, in order not to make things impure during menstruation (Sharma, Vaid, & Manhas, 2006). Some also believe that they will contaminate food as they are filthy and impure (van Eijk et al., 2016). In some of the religions and rural areas even the shadow of menstruating girl is considered evil, especially in holy events where they are not even allowed to move out of the room. Though people follow different religion and culture in different regions, but they share a common thinking. The belief and social taboos make the environment for menstruating girls worse and unhealthy. Instead they should be taken care of more during menses as the flow of blood makes their body weak and also during menstruation the abdominal pain acts as a curse. The mood swings among girls is very common and should be taken more care during that time of the month.

Ways to Tackle

Though the people have developed a lot of cultural practices and removed orthodox beliefs in order to bring change and eliminate
gender discrimination if we compare it with our grand-parents and the generation before them, but also found that the honor couldn’t be brought in the thought process of people regarding menstruation. Attitude of the society hasn’t changed though the generation has changed. Rather it has been passed to the next generation where girls cannot talk about menstruation with their fathers or to anyone else openly. Parents hesitate to talk and mostly choose not to talk about the physical changes and sexuality with teenagers and such scenario can be seen in most of the houses in India (Baldwin & Baranoski, 1990). The change in society’s behaviour can only be brought by bringing change in ourselves and in every individual. The first approach of reshaping can be through schools where the teenage girls with their mother and father should talk about it comfortably. Parents are the flag-bearers, who pass on cultural and religious practices and the relevant traditional beliefs to the progeny. They are the stepping stone of change (Brock & Jennings, 1993). They should be educated about the logic behind the ancestor’s belief and discuss about the social beliefs and taboos regarding menstruation and the reason behind their belief. Every action in the past by our ancestors had some logic behind it as per their situation as technology was not developed that time. Today, when technology has brought so many developments in every field, now the situation and environment is totally reformed, yet people’s way of thinking hasn’t changed. In ancient times, during menstruation a girl used to stay in one room and use to sleep on sand because at that time sanitary pads were not introduced and they didn’t have control on blood stains and believed it to be unethical. But today also, girls are asked to stay in an isolated room and sleep on sand despite the availability of sanitary pads, time has changed with which the people have to understand these things and accept them in a positive manner. Eating sour things during menstruation affects the blood flow and that’s why eating pickles were asked to be avoided but people had made it a taboo that their touch to food item would make it impure which was illogical. These kinds of practices are needed to be laid off.

The maintenance of health and hygiene during menses among women should be promoted through educational programs (Spanier, 1978). Most of the women are anaemic and have low haemoglobin because of not following a proper and healthy diet. There is a need to sensitize people to create hygienic environment and habits and follow it during menarche. Women’s health has always been a matter of concern whether we talk about king’s era or modern era. The women after attaining menopause suffer because of weak bones and their bodies stop taking minerals and calcium, therefore it is very important that they should follow a healthy diet during teenage and after i.e.,
from age 15 to 45 so that after 50s they have less vulnerable bones problems which might increase their life expectancies.

Discussion

Menstruation is a natural process to reproduce, giving essence to a new life and thus human existence has been possible through years by years. Perhaps people should respect it, instead of making menarche an issue of shame for girls in the name of social, cultural and religious beliefs. In every government and private school, counseling of girls, boys and their parents can be a stepping stone where open discussion about social, cultural and religious beliefs and taboos should be executed to bring a mental and behavioural change among people. It will help in building strong relationship between child and parents. It’s not that only girls need to be educated, boys also do need to be educated (Brock & Jennings, 1993). Parents are the best guides for their children to direct the path and give good morals to children (Baldwin & Baranoski, 1990). It’s their duty to teach their daughters not to be ashamed of menarche blood stains or be embarrassed to buy sanitary pads from male shopkeepers or ashamed of the foul smell which they face sometimes during menstruation or the hormonal changes in their body. At the same time sons should be taught and educate to form positive psyche towards menstruating girls so that they respect and support them mentally.

Curiosity and laughter among boys is common during the learning of reproduction chapter in school to which they must be taught the importance of menarche and how their existence is because of menses which they need to understand and respect. We might not be able to change the mentality of our grandparents as it will be difficult for them to bring change in their thought process but we can change the thinking of existing & coming generation as they are in the initial stage of learning, where girls and boys both go through the hormonal changes and they are in the process of learning those changes and are building their morals. They should be taught to be reasonable in their behaviour and need to challenge those cultural beliefs they practice and to motivate others too in their surroundings to discourage those beliefs and taboos

Conclusion

In this paper, an attempt has been made to bring out concerns that exist due to menstruation being viewed as a social, religious and cultural entity. It has been discussed how society has created unequal
space for women and men due to taboos related to purity of body and pollution being associated with it. With the help of secondary data the various taboos followed in different societies and their orthodox attitude have been presented in this paper. The paper has also discussed how one can bring change at individual as well as community level perception. Irrational attitude of people in itself creates a filthy and biased environment for every woman. It’s time for us to look into our attitude towards social norms and taboos and whether they are justified or not. We can bring change by changing our attitude and giving women equal opportunity to get education and employment they desire. We need to understand that menstruation is a natural biological process and not something to be ashamed of. This will help our future generation to create a liberal society.

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