



Review Article

## PRAGMATIC APPROACH TOWARDS MENSTRUAL PRACTICES: A CONTEMPORARY, CULTURAL, AND AYURVEDA SCIENCE REVIEW

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### ABSTRACT

Menstruation is a biological, cultural as well as now a political phenomenon. In culture and traditions across the globe menstruation is surrounded by secrecy, shame, embarrassment, fear, humiliation, silence, and stigma. Apart from these variables, several studies on menstrual practices also include other variables like bothersome, prohibitions, community, presumptions and seclusion. It is easy in today's world to forget that menstruation is all about reproductive health. The practice of menstrual taboos in adolescent girls with its implications on hygiene are widely being studied and published. Ayurveda marks menstruating female as '*Rajaswala*' and instructs to follow certain disciplined life style in terms of diet and routine activities while menstruating. Apart from culture and contemporary science, Ayurveda science believes observance of *Rajaswala paricharya* must for reproductive health and for procurement of healthy offspring. Present article is a review of various research works on menstrual practices globally and review of studies on *Rajaswala paricharya*.

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### INTRODUCTION

Menstruation is a phenomenon which is natural for all women worldwide. The cultural practices related with menstruation across globe are different but are thought to enhance menstrual hygiene management issues. Other important aspect of many religious restrictions is consideration of menstrual blood as dirt or poison and menstruating female is termed as impure or unclean.

The restrictions or code of conduct during menstruation varies according to religion. The common prohibitions practiced are as follows. <sup>[1]</sup>

1. Isolation – Menstrual huts outside village
2. Abstinence from sexual activity
3. Not entering temple, mosque or church and neither to attend any religious functions
4. Not to touch anyone and avoid going to crowded areas

5. Restrictions on domestic activities like cooking, separate utensils for eating
6. Dietary restrictions
7. Head bath

The Indian traditional heritaceous practices related with menstruation were questioned recently and debates were arranged to remove gender disparity associated with such religious practices. The issue is not yet solved and it's a matter which is frequently discussed without scientific evidences and in presence of socialist, feminists, politicians and religious gurus. The purpose of such menstrual practices are ignored or laughed off as they are without evidences.

It is fact that modern women have moved forward in terms of employment and empowerment especially in developing countries like India. She has gained many strides in removing gender inequality and bias in many fields. But in

contrary to women's health, the reproductive health of women is decreasing<sup>[2]</sup> and so has the fertility rate<sup>[3]</sup>. There is tremendous raise in incidences of gynecological disorders. Today, young adolescent girls suffer from illnesses like Polycystic ovarian syndrome, dysmenorrhea, premenstrual syndrome and ovarian cysts.<sup>[4]</sup>

Every culture and society build complex belief system related to reproduction and it is important to understand how the community perceives the phenomena of menstruation. The improvement of reproductive health can be achieved if the myths, values, customs associated with intercourse, fertility, pregnancy are considered.<sup>[5]</sup>

#### AIM

To evaluate the studies on menstrual practices in contemporary research with the healthy science background, Ayurveda and socio-cultural aspects.

#### OBJECTIVES

1. To review and analyze the research studies on knowledge, attitude and practices related to menstruation from previous literary source across the globe.
2. To review the studies on socio-cultural practices of menstruation
3. To review the studies on *Rajaswala paricharya* in Ayurveda

#### Significance of the Study

1. Menstruation in religion is considered as impurity but in medical science it is mirror of reproductive health. It is important to understand menstruation in both aspects because the discussions in last few decades focus only on sanitation and hygiene.

2. The study highlights the socio-cultural beliefs associated with menstruation across the globe.
3. This study provides information about research on menstrual knowledge, attitude and practices in different countries highlighting the type of study, sample size and observations which may help as reference material for future researchers.
4. Studies on Ayurvedic menstrual practices and its understanding are reviewed here for proper understanding of *Rajaswala paricharya* and its significance which is not only for hygiene but emphasizing more on reproductive health and health of progeny.

#### MATERIALS AND METHODS

The data is collected from research articles published online accessing them through scientific platforms like academia, research gate, pubmed, and books on menstrual practices. Simple pooling of data was performed by identifying the articles with key words knowledge, attitude and practices regarding menstruation, source of information, health, *Rajaswala paricharya* and social impact of menstruation. After thorough review of 55 articles and 4 books, total 30 articles and 2 books were incorporated for analysis in this study.

#### Contemporary Research Studies on Menstrual Practices Worldwide

Many research studies related to experience of menstruation amongst different age groups all over the world were reviewed. The studies were qualitative with focal group discussions, in depth interviews and quantitative base of semi structured questionnaires. Following is the summary of few of the research studies systematically searched. The data was collected electronically with references.

**Table 1: Review of studies conducted on menstrual attitudes and restrictions**

S. No	Study method	Salient features of study	Sample size and age	Observations
1	Online survey Convenience sampling 48 item questionnaire <sup>[6]</sup>	Menstrual attitudes and behavior – secrecy, shame, prohibitions, community prescriptions, seclusion, embarrassment	Sample size – 340 Age group – 17 to 62 years	Western secular women have no set codified rules than religious women.
2	Semi structured interview Purposive sample 30 item questionnaire <sup>[7]</sup>	Sex during menstruation	Sample size – 40 Age group – 18 to 59	Women felt negatively towards menstrual sex – confirming cultural assumptions about menstruation as dirty and shameful
3	Private discussions and interview <sup>[8]</sup>	Silence about menstruation	Sample size – 12 3 generations	Silence surrounding menstruation has dissipated but discomfort

				remains
4	Qualitative through 22 item questionnaire [9]	Socio cultural aspects of menstrual attitudes	Sample size – 48 nursing students Reproductive age group 18-35	Cause effect relationship between attitudes and premenstrual experiences Women have rigid social and religious restrictions imposed Suggested need of studying attitudes of men towards menstruation
5	Qualitative and quantitative methods 52 in depth interview 380 group discussions [10]	Socio cultural aspects of menstruation Reproductive disorders like dyspareunia, vaginal discharge, infertility and other aspects like nutrition studied	Sample size – 446 Age group -15-45 years	Menstrual practices like avoiding bathing, sexual activity, seclusion, certain food restrictions, religious rituals, use of cloth
6	Semi structured interview and focus group discussions [11]	Menstrual taboos among young women Stigma of staining	Sample size – 7 interviews FGD – 5 groups of 10 students Age group – 18-21 years	Absenteeism and silence during menstruation in schools, deprivation of materials, cultural stigma, gender inequality, consequences on health and well being of current and future generations
7	Qualitative and quantitative Focus Group Discussion and Key informant interviews Structured questionnaire [12]	Knowledge, practices and restrictions related to menstruation in low socioeconomic society	Sample size – 192 Age group – young (15-24 yrs) Adult > 24 years	Dysmenorrhoea and other problems faced by more than 70% participants. 97.6% followed religious restrictions. Unhygienic practices, unnecessary restrictions. View of boys and adult men as well as religious leaders needed to understand issues better.
8	Qualitative and quantitative methods Purposive sampling [13]	Stigmas related to menstruation and its effect on physical health and mental health	Sample size – 60 Age group – 13 to 21 years	Girls suffer from infections during periods due to poor sanitation. Do not visit gynecologist for infections or menstrual disorders. Restrictions varied from not visiting holy places to avoidance of certain food.
9	Qualitative with Focus group discussions [14]	To explore male attitude towards menstruation	Sample size – 27 Age group – 10 to 12 years elementary school	Young boys have misguided knowledge and errant information about menstruation, they call it as silent topic and an unimportant issue though they desired to learn more but were restricted at home and school
10	Qualitative study to write narrative of topic [15]	To explore source of information about menstruation in young	Sample size – 23 written narrative Age group – 18-24	Source of information family members at onset of sister's menarche, friends.

		men, their perception and gender difference	years (under graduates)	More confused and ignorant by information from school, colleges. Negative menstruation ideologies enforcing sexist attitude
11	Survey study with 66 item questionnaire Convenience sampling [16]	To study observance and non observance of menstrual restrictions and reasons behind same	Sample size – 798 Age group – 16 to 25 yrs	Restrictions of religious rituals were found in maximum girls and reason mentioned was culture and tradition.
12	Interview through semi structured questionnaire, purposive sampling [17]	To study knowledge, perception and socio cultural taboos related to menstruation	Sample size – 100 Age group 13-16	45% knowledge of menstruation, poor menstrual hygiene practices and almost all followed socio cultural restrictions

### Review of Menstrual Practices in Culture and Religions across Globe

The frequent discussions have imposed different thoughts related with menstrual functions in the minds of all. The socio – cultural- religious taboos related with menstruation are surveyed and studied at large in India and across world. The researchers aim at observation of different practices concerning different religion, rural and urban women population, adolescent and reproductive age group. The conclusions of such studies are that menstrual rituals are unhygienic practices which may further cause reproductive health problems.

The patriarchal societies across world have viewed menstrual blood as pollution, dirt, danger and evil. The taboos related with menstruation are global phenomena, yet the impact and extent varies. In many cultures and religions, stigma surrounding menstruation still exists marking female untouchable, unclean leaving her isolated and depriving her routine work.[18]

Socio cultural restrictions across different religions are as follows.[19]

1. Isolation of menstruating women in special designed huts outside village was common taboos among primitive cultures and tribal religions in south Asia, Africa. This seclusion ranges from 3 to 7 days (special sacred reed hut 'Giparu', Golla) Chhaupadi in certain districts of Nepal. [20]
2. In Hindu culture, menstruation is considered as impurity and menstruating female is kept separate form household, not allowed to perform domestic duties, restricted from touching anything, sit in separate areas during religious festivals. Going to temple or

worshipping and intercourse is restricted during menstruation. Not to cook and must keep separate utensils. Avoiding sour foods for fear of smelly period, fish and meat are restricted and not touching certain food items like pickles to prevent contamination and the general belief that menstruation dispels toxic blood.

3. In Jewish culture taboos include playing sports together, directly handling or receiving objects and eating together in the same plate.
4. Menstruating Muslim women in most conservative families are restricted from praying, touching the Quran, fasting during Ramzan. ritual washing after menstruation to become clean again.
5. In Buddhism menstruating women cannot meditate nor they have contact with priest cannot take part in wedding ceremonies either. Menstruating women lose Qi (spiritual energy), may attract ghosts and is therefore threat to others.[21,22]
6. In ancient literature *Manusmriti* states that "The wisdom, the energy, the strength, the might, and the vitality of a man who approaches a woman who has menstrual excretions, utterly perish.[23]
7. In another literature of Hindu code of law *Parashar Smriti*; the author is compassionate towards woman and says 'The women, old or young are never polluted in any way and if polluted can attain purity through menstruation'. He even says that woman is like land and cannot be made impure. [24]This law is contradictory to others found in many cultures and religion.
8. In Western cultures avoid activities such as concerts, camping, picnics, or any other activity

- that may limit their access to a bathroom for fear of leaking and letting out their 'secret'.
9. Poisonous powers of menstruation in orthodox cultures in England, some believe that the milk handled by a woman during her menses cannot be churned to butter; that hams will not take salt at her hands. Many of the primitives believe that the evil spirit may get into menstruating women in the form of a snake, lizard or bird.
  10. In South Africa, the kaffirs think that if these women drink milk, the cow will die.
  11. If a menstruating woman sits under a tree, the fruit will come tumbling down and all plants will turn yellow if she comes near them. In Galela menstruating women are not allowed to enter the tobacco field. In Sumatra, they must keep away from the rice fields. In Saigon, if such a woman works on opium, it will turn bitter. In central Australia they are not allowed to gather bulbs which are their foodstuff.
  12. In north of France, menstruating women are not permitted to enter into the sugar factories as they will spoil the boiling sugar. In Syria, they must keep away from salting or pickling.
  13. The ancient Jews protected themselves in many ways from a menstruating woman. Whatever they touched had to be burned. A menstruating woman could not go to church, or touch anything sacred.

The extent to which the religious rules about menstruation are followed is not known. Most of the practices were found in tribal and backward rural areas. The urbanization and empowerment have led to tremendous decline in such practices. Yet, a population study in a district of Tamilnadu suggested that socio cultural practices

are comparatively high amongst urban respondents but except religious and ceremonial related taboos, women did not favour practice of other social taboos. [25]

### Ayurvedic Rajaswala Paricharya

Ayurveda emphasizes on prevention of illnesses and have described mode of life to be practiced by women during different important phases of her life. The sole aim of such 'code of conduct' or 'modes of life' was to ascertain that her body undergoing drastic changes in terms of anatomy, physiology and psychology; responds healthily. She is prevented from becoming vulnerable to diseases pertaining to phase like menstruation, pregnancy and postpartum. These codes of conduct are called as 'Paricharyas' and non observance of these Paricharyas by female has consequences on reproductive health and making her susceptible to other illnesses.

Rajaswala paricharya in Ayurveda texts is an important step of preconception care. It helps the menstruating women to attain equilibrium of Doshas, relieve symptoms related with menstruation, prevent her reproductive health and prepare reproductive system for conception attaining a healthy offspring.[26,27,28,29]

The Rajaswala (menstruating female) is thought to be of one of the following category due to the regimen prescribed. 1. Undergone Shodhana procedure. 2. Agnimandya (low digestive power) 3. Wounded (Vranita)[30]

Many review studies done by Ayurveda scholars highlights the significance of dietary and other restrictions, prescribed food and activities.

**Table 2: Rajaswala Paricharya and its Significance** [31]

Avoid sleeping during day time and sleep on Darbha mattress	Prevents formation of Ama and aggravation of Kapha. Darbha is Eragrostis cynosuroides which absorbs heavy radiations. Also it has antimicrobial properties, anti cancerous and antioxidant properties.[32,33]
Avoid laughing, too much of talking, running, exercising, crying.	All prevents vitiation of Vatadosha which may cause painful menstruation along with change in Shuddh aartava lakshana.
Avoid use of Abhyanga, Udvartana and Lepana	It is contraindicated in Agnimandya, also sweat releases toxins and pheromones during this period which should not be hampered.
Avoid use of Anjana, cosmetics and ornaments	Traditionally Anjana is prepared from ghee and herbs for cooling effect, as during menstruation normal Pitta function is required for proper menstrual flow, use of Anjana and even Henna may decrease blood flow. Avoiding cosmetics and ornaments decrease sexual drive and arousal.
Avoid sexual activity	During menstruation the pH of vagina increases which becomes vulnerable to yeast infections. Cervix is lower in position, opening more dilated and uterine endometrial lining absent

	allowing transmission of sexually transmitted disease and other microorganisms through blood. <sup>[34]</sup>
Avoid bathing (head bath)	Bath is contraindicated during <i>Agnimandya</i> . The rise in Basal Body Temperature after ovulation declines after menstruation due to estrogen. The use of hot or cold water for bath may hamper homeostasis by hypothalamus.
Avoid <i>Tikshna</i> (pungent), <i>Katu</i> (spicy) and <i>Lavana</i> (salty) food.	Increased <i>Pitta dosha</i> due to such diet may increase menstrual flow and change <i>Shuddha artava lakshana</i>
Avoid <i>Swedana karma</i> , <i>Nasyakarma</i> , <i>Vamana karma</i> and other <i>Panchakarma</i> procedures	Menstruating female has <i>Agnimandya</i> and she is categorized under <i>Vranita</i> (a person having wound), hence any type of <i>Shodhana</i> is contraindicated.
Harbor good thoughts and concentrate on auspicious things	Menstruation and premenstruation phase is associated with mood swings, impulsive behavior, irritability, poor concentration and memory with depression and anxiety due to hormone fluctuations. Sometimes menstruation may trigger psychosis in susceptible individual. <sup>[35]</sup> Good and virtuous thoughts prevents stress and anxiety and instability of emotions.
Eat <i>Havishya</i> (meal made from <i>Sali</i> rice, ghee and milk) and <i>Yawaka</i> (meal made of barley and milk) in clay utensils or leaves. <i>Karshanahara</i> , <i>Deepana</i> , <i>Vatanulomana</i> .	<i>Jatharagni</i> improves by <i>Havishya</i> and is easily digestible, rich in carbohydrate gives strength. Diarrhoea and constipation is observed in menstruating female due to release of prostaglandins and effect of progesterone. This diet will prevent gastric disturbances.

Ayurveda classics describes female reproductive tract disorders under *Yonivyapada* and one amongst the *Samanya nidana* (common cause) in *Mithya achara* (*Ch.Chi.30/8*) i.e., faulty diet and lifestyle.<sup>[36]</sup> The current era with changing demands of the society on women have made it difficult to follow the regimen strictly and the consequences of which are raised menstrual abnormalities, decreased fertility and decreased reproductive health. The fertility of future generation also depends upon the health status of mother and her regimen.

The specific code of conduct of *Rajaswala* ensures a normal menstruation (*Shuddhaartava* *Ch.Chi.30/ 225-226*)<sup>[37]</sup>

1. Interval - Monthly
2. Without excessive unctuousness, pain or burning sensation
3. Duration – 5 days
4. Colour of menstrual blood like *Gunjaphala* etc.

Not observing the *Rajaswala paricharya* may cause *Yonivyapada*, manifests as *Ashtaartavadushti* like *Kunapagandhi* (foul smelling), *Pootipuya* (pyogenic) *Granthibhuta* (clotted) *Ksheena* (scanty) or in the form of *Artavavridhi* (excessive menstruation) and *Artavakshaya* (scanty and irregular).

These *Yonivyapada* and menstrual disorders have dire consequences on fertility. (*Ch. Chi 30/38-39, Su. Sa. Sa. 2/3*)<sup>[38,39]</sup>

Till date only two observational/interventional study on effect of observance of *Rajaswala paricharya* on menstrual symptoms have

been conducted. 30 unmarried girls of age group 18 to 24 years were studied after following *Rajaswala paricharya* in terms of diet and other activities for 3 days for 6 consecutive cycles. There was significant decrease in menstrual symptoms like backache, cramps, legs pain, headache, pimples, breast tenderness, loss of appetite, diarrhoea, constipation, vomiting, weakness and others in girls following the *Rajaswala paricharya* and the compliance increased because of benefits to the subjects who participated in the study.<sup>[40]</sup> One case study on dysfunctional uterine bleeding on a 25 year old female reported observance of *Rajaswala paricharya* for four consecutive cycles led to return of her menstrual cycle to normal from heavy bleeding. <sup>[41]</sup>

## DISCUSSION

The review of all three sections of study i.e. contemporary, cultural and Ayurveda shows divergence in attitude and practices. Contemporary practices highlight use of sanitation and hygiene neglecting other aspects of reproductive health like infertility, menstrual abnormalities, dysmenorrhea and others which do not arise due to improper hygiene. Many research around menstrual practices demean them as menstrual taboos posing sanitary pads as ultimate solution to all menstrual issues.<sup>[42]</sup> The observation of research studies is analyzed in three domains i.e., knowledge, attitude and practices surrounding menstruation. Analyzing the knowledge domain, silence and ignorance about menstruation physiology amongst adolescent girls was reflected in about all studies. Knowledge and information are power which can change attitude.

Ignorance fails to gain positive attitude surrounding menstruation and hence negative attitude towards menstruation in young and older generation women is prevalent. The menstruation practices are still rigid in terms of religious aspects confirming menstruation as impure and escalating cultural stigma. In different cultures across globe the general attitude towards menstruation and practices signifies impurity and dirt. Menstrual health which is a fundamental part of reproductive health has been neglected. Contradictory to this, Ayurveda emphasizes on menstrual practices as a must for reproductive health and procuring healthy progeny. Even though only review studies about understanding *Rajaswala paricharya* and its significance on reproductive health are published. A single observational study on dysmenorrhea and single case study on *Asrigdara* was available through online content.

### CONCLUSION

The drastic shift in women's role in family has led to disappearance of many social restrictions and practices. Yet, the religious practices are strongly followed in fear of supernatural punishments. Practices like avoiding physical activity, sexual practices, food, cooking and eating with others are thought to be myths / taboos and are disappearing with increasing education and employment. The immense burden of increasing menstrual disorders and morbidities in women of all age group demands attention of all sciences towards all domain of menstruation especially practices like *Paricharyas*. It is the need of hour to adapt scientific practices of *Rajaswala paricharya* as a mode of prevention against many disorders of reproductive system. Additional interventional studies on effect of *Rajaswala paricharya* on reproductive health and health of offspring is crucial to reduce the burden of infertility clinics.

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