REGIMEN DURING MENSTRUATION: MYTHS AND REALITY

Ektha B. S.¹, Dr. Reshma Saokar², M. Keerthi¹ and L. Niru Devi¹

¹²nd Year BAMS, SDM Institute of Ayurveda and Hospital, Bengaluru, Karnataka.
²Associate Professor, Dept. of Rasashastra & BK SDM Institute of Ayurveda and Hospital,
Bengaluru, Karnataka.

ABSTRACT

In the tradition of menstruating women not being allowed to enter the temple premises persists in India from an ancient period. Till date, our society is unaware of scientific explanations hidden behind such practices as menstruation which is a natural cycle has adopted more of religious connotations and is also followed by a set of restrictions. Menstruation in India is still a taboo, which is the sole reason why the science behind such traditional practices is not gaining importance. In this article an attempt to throw light on how the ancestral belief regarding menstruation has scientific background and is not merely a myth. The paper also deals about the need of understanding and practicing the religious customs, by stating various facts about menstruation and its physiology as per Ayurveda. Furthermore, just by practicing some easy methods of Indian culture, how a woman can avoid various diseases and acquire enormous health benefits have also been included in the paper. The age old traditions of the society were practiced in order to maintain the good health of women both physically as well as mentally. Certain constraints imposed on women back then had various benefits as they are purely based on scientific aspects and not just a myth.

KEYWORDS: Menstruation, Ayurveda, Rajakaala.

INTRODUCTION

India is known for its diversity in various aspects like religion, culture, tradition, ethnicity, etc. Most of the traditions that we follow at present, were inherited by our ancestors. The ancestral beliefs regarding various religious practices had a scientific background and were not just a myth. Some of the traditions that are titled as ‘blind belief’ in today’s world are the
practices of menstruation. In this fast-growing world where people are modernizing themselves in various aspects, menstruation is still not a topic of public discussion in our society.

Even today, menstruation a natural process responsible for the human existence is considered something to be ashamed of. People not willing to talk about menstruation publicly, has led to various misinterpretations of certain traditional restrictions imposed on women. The society fails to understand that those customs which were meant to be followed by menstruating women, were measures taken to maintain the health of the women and not to suppress them. Though the tradition regarding menstruation had scientific explanations as a support in ancient times, later, it became associated with only religious connotations finally turning into a sheer myth. In order to vanquish the misperception of cultural practices, it becomes essential to primarily understand the science behind them.

**Introduction to menstrual cycle:** Menstrual cycle is defined as a cyclic event in a rhythmic fashion during the reproductive period of a woman's life. Menstrual cycle begins at the age of 12-15 years, which marks the onset of puberty and ceases at the age of 50-55 years. The commencement of menstruation is called menarche and the cessation is termed as menopause. On an average the duration of menstrual cycle can be considered as 28 days. Under physiological conditions, it may vary between 20 to 40 days.

**Menstruation according to Ayurveda**

Different opinions regarding the duration, formation of *raja or artava*, can be witnessed in Ayurveda. Usually the term *raja* is used to denote the menstrual blood whereas *artava* is used to refer ovum.

The life span of woman is divided into three stages according to Acharya Sushrutha – viz *Balavashta* (young age), *Madhyamaavastha* (middle age) and *Vridhavastha* (old age).

*Balavashta* – It is the first stage, which lasts up to sixteen years. During this span of time, the dhatus are immature; body is unable to withstand troubles as *bala* is not fully developed.

*Madhyamaavastha* – This is considered as the adult period of a woman’s life.

*Vridhavastha* – This is span of time in woman’s life extends from menopause till death.
Rajaswala includes three phases

1) Rajasrava kala – The period of first 3-5 days of menstruation where there is shedding of endometrium.

2) Ritu kala – The period after menstruation this can be correlated to proliferative phase and ovulation viz., 12-16 days. Establishment of navina raja can be observed

3) Rajavyatheetha kala - The period after ovulation which can be considered as the secretory phase viz., 9-13 days. Presence of purana raja can be witnessed

Dosha predominancy at different stages of rajaswala

- Rajasrava kala – vata
- Ritu kala – kapha
- Raja vyatheetha – pitta

Formation of raja

- According to some of them, the raja is formed from rasa dhatu, while others opine that, the rakta accumulates over a period and then is discharged as artava. Chakrapani gives a clarification by stating that, artava which is initially formed from rasa dhatu is saumya, and later at the time of excretion it undergoes specific changes and agneya guna (hot potency) gets incorporated.

- Apart from the above information, references about the charyas (regimen) that a woman must follow to avoid diseases and acquire health benefits can also be found in the classics.

Mode of living during menstruation according to classics: The regimen that women had to follow for their own good are mentioned in Ayurvedic texts. Right from the first day of menstruation, primarily one should maintain chastity. The contra-indications include divaswapanam(sleeping during day time), rodana(crying), pralapa(prolong speech), anjana(apply collyrium), abhyanga(massage), vyayama(exercise) etc. Acharya Sushruta, mentions that apart from maintaining abstinence, one should sleep on the bed made of Truna Panchamula, eat havishya(a meal containing ghee, milk, rice) in an earthen pot(due to it’s cooling effect). Nasya(nasal drops), swedana(sudation), vamana(vomiting procedure) procedures are also not indicated during this period. It is also advised that a menstruating woman should not consume katu(spicy), amla(sour) and lavana(salty) food as it can aggravate pitta dosha.
The regimens that were told by our Acharyas, were not just aimed at maintaining the health of women, but also focused on how following those regimens, can help in ensuring good progeny. It was also believed that a woman, who does not abide to these regimens, will give birth to an abnormal child. For example, if a woman does *divaswapna* (day sleep) during menstruation she will give birth to a child who is *nidraalu* (lazy), use of collyrium by the mother will result in blindness of the child *etc*.

**Traditional practices during menstruation:** According to the history of Indian culture, menstruating women were supposed to follow a set of rules and regulations. As mentioned before, the ancestral beliefs regarding certain traditions had a major motive behind them. The customs that the women were compelled to follow were never aimed at suppressing them. On the contrary, it was framed and practiced so that a woman could maintain good menstrual as well as reproductive health. Though, most of rituals that a woman followed at the time of menstruation, were common in many parts of the country, some of them were specific to either a community or a region. For example, the practice of women not being allowed to enter the temple was followed everywhere, whereas menstruating women spending time in seclusion huts were specific to some of the regions.

**Some of the practices that were followed in ancient times**
- Avoiding household chores like cooking, cleaning and other physical exertions.
- Maintaining celibacy.
- Being confined to one place to maintain distance from people, plants, animals etc.
- Not entering the temples or any place of religious activities etc.

According to our Acharyas, some of the contra-indicated acts during menstruation are – *divaswapna, anjana, nasya, rodana, snana, pradhavana, nakhaapakarsha, bhramacharya etc.*

**Science behind the traditions of menstruation**

**Seclusion huts:** In many parts of India, people deeply believed in the concept of seclusion huts. These seclusion huts could be found in those places where women could not be provided a separate room in their homes. The seclusion huts were constructed on the outskirts of a village or town, where the women of nearby places would spend time giving complete rest to their body during menstruation. This tradition was practiced in order to keep the
women away from excessive physical and mental exertion, which otherwise would severely affect the women’s health.

It was believed that, a woman during menstruation is extremely powerful and has negative energy inside her. The power that a woman possesses at the time of menstruation is so much that she is capable of draining the positive energy from all the living things around her. For example, a *tulsi* (holy basil) plant withers away when touched by a menstruating woman as she draws all the energy that it contains. These are some of the reasons that can support the isolation of women during menstruation.

According to *Ayurveda*, everything is composed of *pancha mahabhuta* (five basic elements). As per theory of *pancha mahabhuta*, *rakta dhatu* is *panchabhoutik* in nature. The presence of *prithvi mahabhuta*, is the main reason behind the characteristic odor or what is termed as *visritatva* of *rakta dhatu* (blood) in *Ayurveda*. It is known that the animals have well-developed olfactory sensation when compared to humans. This unique feature of animals makes it easy for them to detect the menstrual blood due its *visritatva* (characteristic odour). Hence a woman during her menses becomes a prey for the wild animals if let out of the house.

**Maintaining celibacy:** Maintaining celibacy during menstruation is of utmost importance as it can be the root cause of adverse effects on the woman, man and their progeny, if not followed. One of the main causes for the aggravating the *vata*, is excess exercise. Coitus becomes an act of excessive physical exertion during menstruation, leading to increase in *vata*. According to text *Astanga Hrudaya*, it is said that, if copulation occurs on the first day of menstruation, it leads to either pseudocyesis, intrauterine death or immediate death after delivery, on second day, it can lead to abortion, immediate death after birth or death within few days after birth, on the third day fertilization may occur but the progeny will have defective body parts and is believed to have a short life span.

**Restrictions on entering temples:** Till date, a fallacious belief prevails in India that, menstrual blood is impure and hence women should not be allowed to enter the temples. The phenomena associated with this ritual can be explained considering various aspects of science.
The temples, in Indian culture had utmost importance and were not meagerly a building of concrete. The science behind the architecture and construction of temple is deep. Back then, the temples were built in places where abundance of positive energy due to earth’s magnetic field could be found. Each temple consisted of ardhamantapa, mantapa, garbhagriha, shikhara, amalaka and kalasha. The garbhagriha (centre) is the place where earth’s magnetic waves are found to be maximum. Beneath the idol of god, a copper plate is placed which helps in radiating positive energy throughout the temple premises. This positive energy travels through the feet of the people and moves upwards inside the body to activate the lower chakras. As the shad chakras are considered as the healing centers of the body, a person feels relaxed when they are activated. When there is upward movement of positive energy, the first chakra that gets activated is mooladhara. This lowest chakra, is situated near the apanavata. Hence the activation of mooladhar chakra, has an impact on apanavata, especially in menstruating women. The flow of menstrual blood is the result of action as well as anuloma gati (downward direction) of apana vata (type of vata). The upward transmission of positive energy in the body causes obstruction to the natural downward movement of apanavata thereby hampering the menstrual flow. It can also be deduced by the above explanation that, if the positive energy increases to a great extent, it can also change the gati of apana vata resulting in manifestation of diseases. Endometriosis is one of the leading menstrual disorders, for which the exact cause is not known. In contemporary science, various theories have been postulated regarding the causes of endometrioses. Among those, Retrograde theory says that endometrioses is caused because of the incomplete evacuation of menstrual blood, leading to deposition of the leftover blood either on the uterus, fallopian tubes or the ovaries. In Ayurveda, endometrioses can be correlated to the pratilomagati (upward movement) of apanavata.

Apart from the positive energy that is absorbed by the feet, the energy radiated by ringing the temple bell also has the power to activate the shad chakras because of its composition, causing the same effect as mentioned above.

Our ancestors believed that, the activation of chakras, would take place effectively when other processes in the body like digestion and metabolism does not disturb the activation. Hence, people used to do upavasa (fasting) before going to the temple. Doing upavasa, results in aggravation of vatadosha. Naturally there is predominance of vata during menses, upon that if a menstruating woman does upavasa, it can lead to further aggravation.
CONCLUSION

- Considering the social changes which have taken place over a period of time, especially with technological advancements inter alia, it is practically not possible to follow all the traditional practices.
- Major practices like not visiting a temple should not be overlooked.
- However, it can be made sure that the practices were always beneficial to women both physically and psychologically and were never meant to suppress them.
- It can be concluded that, if menstruation is considered as an essential topic for public discussion, then the scientific reasons can be understood by the mass, which helps in betterment of women in terms of health.

REFERENCES

2. Sushrutha, Sushrutha Shareerasthana, Human anatomy in Ayurveda by Dr. U. Govinda Raju, Chaukamba Sanskrit Pratishthan, Delhi, Reprint 2017, 3rd chapter, period of fertilisation 3rd quotation, 21.