

Critique on Contemporary Debates on Menstrual Taboo in India: Through Caste Lens

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2017 is marked by the online debates on Menstrual Taboo by online urban feminists, students and scholars. These debates have proclaimed and projected the issue of menstrual taboo prevalent in Brahmin and upper-caste households as the single most significant feminist issue of the country. The film *Padman* (2018) directed by R. Balki became a commercial success that discusses both the menstrual taboo and as well as the unavailability of sanitary napkins for women from varied social backgrounds. The film highlights the unspeakability of menstruation in families especially a taboo obstructs the dialogue between men and women. Invention of the cheaper sanitary napkin as against the expensive napkins produced by the capitalist market forms the crux of the story of *Padman*. However, such unilateral representation of a liberal and superficial discussion on menstruation without using caste lens is not only a distortion but also leads to stigmatization of the “third world” the constitutive other to the western society that reinforce the Europocentrism. Third world feminists like Chandra Mohanty point out, for the western world all Indian women uniformly suffer more evil patriarchy as the west proclaims dowry violence and subjugation in the name of veil as the only manifestations of patriarchal oppression in India. (Mohanty, 2007) Similarly, unilateral portrayal of menstruation by Indian cinema and as well as media (social media too) strengthens the similar Europocentrism.

This is a response to the recent online protest against the taboos on menstruation in Indian society launched by some students and middle class educated men and women. Ananya Johar's show on 'Period' in this context raised several questions on the taboos associated with natural bodily change like menstruation and even celebrated menstrual bleeding as the only bloodshed without any violence. While it is a commendable initiative by the youth and students across the campuses to openly discuss the linguistically prohibited area of menstruation and related rituals, it is also important to point out the gaps in such debates. My own observations might also be limited to the Andhra Pradesh region and certain social groups and I would be committed to learn from the margins and the centres of other social and regional locations as well in this context.

It is a culture shock for several Indian women to know that there have been several taboos associated with menstruation in middle class Hindu families. The reason is that many women do not suffer these taboos in their families but certainly suffer the pain of menstruation. Some such taboos include menstruating women being made to shift to another room for the limited period of three days, prohibition from touching the pickles and papads (as they believe pickles would rot and decompose), denial of entry into the kitchen, bedroom and puja room and restrictions on sex during menstruation. Another significant taboo that these debates have pointed out is that women cannot reveal or speechify the fact that she is menstruating/bleeding at a particular point of time especially to men. The napkins or tampons that she uses during the menstruation are expected to be disposed by her in absolute secrecy. While it is important to fight these taboos which restrict the mobility of women, humiliate them for a natural bodily change and their freedom of expression, it is also important to understand that this political struggle is limited to a particular set of communities and caste groups in India. Thence, it is equally important to understand what kind of suffering is associated with menstruation for women from other caste groups.

Firstly, women are made to suffer the stigma precisely to ensure the caste purity of the family. It is only Brahmins and upper-castes who have the privilege to uphold the caste purity while the lower castes and Dalits have no such entitlements to ritual purity and self-respect. Impurities like menstruation can affect the purity of the household periodically for a limited period of time. This limited period of “untouchability” is also suffered by Brahmin and upper-caste males in case of the death of a family member (though the rituals differ from what women go through during their menstruation). This is in sharp contrast to the eternal untouchable condition that the actual untouchables suffer. This is the way in which the caste Hindus guard their household from temporary pollution apart from securing it from the pollutions caused by the entry of an untouchable. The recent protests have successfully mapped out the oppressive tendencies of the middle classes with regard to menstruation without actually questioning the Brahminic concepts of purity pollution, caste system and Brahminical patriarchy. However, the questions on menstrual taboo had not extended beyond the restrictions on mobility, GST on sanitary napkins and utilitarian demands on availability of more comfortable napkins like Max-Nights, extra long wings, heavy flow, odour control and extra soft. On the one hand, the protests question the social and familial taboos and the state for not exempting napkins from GST, on the other hand their demands for production of better napkins is taken care of by the capitalist market which has made all these products already available in the market for the middle class women but out of reach for lower-class women with high prices.

In the middle class households, generally after the usage of the napkin, it is dumped into the dustbin that is placed in the toilet (or backyard in the villages) and not in the dustbin placed in the kitchen or drawing room. There ends the whole story of the middle class woman, but not the

pain of all women. These napkins are separated from the other parts of the house systematically by only dumping them in the toilet trash, but this eventually joins leftover food and other kinds of household trash in the hands of a municipality scavenger. But today, plastic bags can conceal the repulsive graphics of this mixture of the waste from the middle class householder. But here one should not forget the fact, in our society there are scavengers who search for food in the municipality garbage dumps. They may find pieces of pizza along with the disposed sanitary napkins or even the disposed diapers. On the other hand, in the public funded offices and corporate offices, where the napkins are most commonly disposed off in the dustbins of the toilets are further handled (mostly removed by their bare hands) by the house-keeping staff who are by and large lower caste women. However, the brands of sanitary napkins which come up with innovative ideas about the comfort levels of napkins, have not provided any innovative ways of disposal of the napkins that suits the Indian society. Middle class women have not demanded such innovation in recent online movement. But anyhow the synthetic disposable sanitary napkins have a very short history in India (It started probably in 1888 in the U.S and became popular in Indian market in seventies). Therefore, I would like to discuss two questions, viz. what were the conditions prevailing before the availability of disposable napkins is one and the condition of those women who still cannot afford to avail of disposable napkins.

Women used the frills of their nine-yard saree gathered up and folded inside to soak the blood during the menstruation. The upper-caste and Brahmin women used to remove the saree and dump it in the backyard. The washer man or woman (a lower caste in India whose occupation is washing clothes) used to collect the saree and return it after washing and drying. In the later period, upper-caste women used pieces of white cloth that were reusable and therefore the blood soaked piece of cloth is again collected by the washer man/woman.ⁱ Backyard and back gate of the houses are primarily built in order to avoid the entry of Dhobis and house maids into the house. They enter from the back gate and complete their work in the backyard itself. Mostly in villages and towns, Dhobis wash the clothes after boiling them in Soudu (an extract from Soudu soil) in a separate lake which is meant for washing clothes known as *chakali cheruvu*.ⁱⁱ Menstruation is not a secret private affair in this context. The fact that the woman physically shifted to another corner of the house reveals this to the men folk in the family. Here, the washer man who is biologically a male also knows about the menstruation time of upper-caste women as he receives the blood soaked clothes or cloth to wash. However, there has been a systemic process of emasculation of lower caste men in several contexts in the rituals of Hindu society. Baby Kamble discussed how *Potraj*, a Mahar male child, wearing bangles, anklets and skirt, dances in the procession during the festival of Ashad for alms.(Kamble,2008) In some similar festivals of Telanagana region like Batukamma and Bonalu, Potraj, a dalit man bare-chested, flagellates himself in the procession. This is an example of how an untouchable male is emasculated by the masculine upper-caste groups and even Shudra castes. To take cues from

Bell Hooks, masculinity is a system of power. (Hooks,1984) Upper-caste women are part of such masculine power centres according to the caste system in relation to the lower castes and Dalits. Hence, they are part and parcel of the process of emasculation of the lower castes or Dalits. To quote Elizabeth Spellman, “On her (Simone de Beauvoir) own terms it ought to be misleading to say, as she does, that we live “in a world that belongs to men” (xx, 512,563), as if all differences between princess and paupers, masters and slaves can be canceled out by the fact that they are all male.”(Spellman, 1988) Not only the world belongs to only certain men (also some women) and not all males, masculinity as a system of power cannot privilege all men in all contexts. Especially the washer man who is cleaning the filth, which is similar to the wife's duty to clean the household, forms the philosophical grounds to his emasculation. If cleaning one's own dirt is considered painful, Dhobis wash the dirt of the others and in some parts of the country they also suffer the stigma of untouchability and are traditionally transfixed to the caste based humiliating profession of washing clothes of all kinds. Some people even believe that the people from chakali caste essentially possess the skill of washing clothes cleaner. In February, 2017, Telangana government announced the free distribution of washing machines to Dhobis.

A tradition that is followed even today in Andhra Pradesh is that the upper-caste girl's clothes worn on the day of attaining puberty, clothes with blood stains are mandatorily offered to chakali women. This ritual relieves the upper-castes from the pollution caused by the first menstruation of the girls thus directing the pollution to chakali women. These chakali women are considered as receivers of the pollution in order to protect the purity of the upper-caste households. Untouchables and lower castes are an essential part of the society for the upper-castes to uphold their purity. Gopal Guru says, “Just imagine what would happen to the touchable, if the untouchable were to refuse to become the dumping ground for somebody's moral dirt or refuse to illuminate the touchable. It perhaps would lead to the moral decomposition or atrophy of the touchables' body or they would get crushed under the accumulated weight of these impurities. (Thank god, there has been an untouchable around to carry this burden!)”(Guru, 2009)

Gopal Guru also says, “Practicing untouchability at home becomes the major source of the sovereignty.” (Guru, 2009) Therefore the upper-caste household is guarded forever from the pollution that can be caused by the entry of an untouchable and the cooking of meat (many Brahmins or other vegetarians may eat meat outside the household but do not allow its cooking inside) and temporary pollution of the menstruation of household women. In the public space, lower caste and Dalit women labour even during their menstruation to produce paddy, wheat and vegetables and those are not considered to be polluted. Those taboos about touch of a menstruating woman as polluting are not applicable to the public space. Therefore, lower caste women get no exemption from their work in feudal societies. Not only that these women cannot have any leisure or rest during the menstruation, they also may suffer the paucity of cloth which

is traditionally used instead of napkin. Therefore, they wash the cloth and reuse it several times and at times, they even beg the upper-caste women to provide them rags. Since Dalits and lower castes do not possess purity of caste or sexuality, their menstruation is not a taboo according to the Brahminical patriarchy. Therefore, they also take part in the cooking and cleaning at home as usual. Apart from receiving ritual pollution of upper-caste women's menstruation they also free them from the empirical dirt of menstruation by disposing their sanitary napkins.

The obligations of ritual purity and taboos associated with menstruation are part and parcel of the privileges and oppression associated with the upper-caste status for women. The idea of menstruation of upper-caste women is further distorted by Dalit movement to the extent that they highlighted the slogan that 'all women are untouchables' (Surendra Jondhale, 1995). Does this mean women who become untouchables during their menstruation suffer the same social disability that Dalit men and women suffer? Then a Brahmin man who suffers ritual pollution for a period after the death of a family member can also be categorized as an untouchable! Women traditionally are upholders of tradition and culture of the caste/community they belong to unless she chooses to question her own privilege and exploitation by the patriarchal family or caste group. Elizebeth Spellman says, "During the war of succession, no Southerners were more passionate in upholding Slavery than the women." (Spellman, 1988) Similarly, women are as responsible as men in upholding Brahminism in traditional societies. Taboos associated with menstruation are part of such celebration of Brahminism that essentially differentiate the women with purity from the women who are eternally impure. However the 'feminist' protest seems to have overlooked the fact of caste purity associated with menstrual taboo. The Brahminization of woman's body engendered stigma of shame and guilt about bleeding monthly.

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ⁱ Thanks to women from chakali community who shared their narratives with me.

ⁱⁱ Thanks to my mother for sharing her observations during sixties and seventies with me.