



SOCIO-CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES AROUND MENARCHE: A STUDY AMONG SCHEDULE CASTE COLLEGE STUDENTS IN TAMIL NADU, INDIA

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ABSTRACT Though, menstruation is a natural and physiological process for all healthy adult women as ever it has been surrounded by secrecy and myths in many societies. With this in mind, this paper made an attempt to study the socio-cultural perception and practices among the college going SC students. This study was conducted during 2015 among 634 students who staying at Adi Dravidar Welfare hostels. Majority of the study population families followed many restrictions and the controlled the menstruated girl's mobility and behavior. It indicates that the study society strongly believed that the women during menses are impure or unclean to perform their religious duties. This may possibly due to their ignorance and false perceptions regarding menstruation. Thus the above results of the study reinforce the need to educate the youth in the country about the issues and facts of menstruation, physiological implications regarding significance of menstruation and development of secondary sexual characteristics. This can be promoted and achieved through vigorous IEC activities such as like television educational program, compulsory family life education curriculum in schools and knowledgeable interactions of health personnel, teachers and parents with adolescent girls.

KEYWORDS : Socio-cultural taboos, menstruation, young girls, schedule caste

Introduction: Menarche is the beginning of the menstrual function especially the first menstrual period of an individual. Menarche when a girl turns into a woman experiences major and minor changes (Soumya and Sequira Leena (2016). The onset of menstruation is one of the most important land-mark in the process of growth and maturation of females. Though, menstruation is a natural and physiological process for all healthy adult women as ever it has been surrounded by secrecy and myths in many societies (Deo and Chattargi, 2005).

Many studies proved that menstruation and menstrual practices are still clouded by taboos and socio-cultural restrictions resulting in adolescent girls remaining ignorant of the scientific facts and hygienic health practices which sometimes result into adverse health outcomes (Dasgupta and Sarkar, 2008). A number of studies carried out in developing countries have shown varying socio-cultural beliefs and practices related to menstruation. The beliefs and practices include prohibitions in going to religious places, talking about menses at public places, the use of unsanitary absorbent materials, and lifting heavy objects (Lawan, Yusuf and Musa, 2010; Adinma and Adinma, 2009; Dhingra, Kumar and Kour, 2009). With this in mind, this paper made an attempt to study the socio-cultural perception and practices among the college going SC students.

Methodology: The study was conducted among the college going students who residing at Adi Dravidar welfare hostels in Tamil Nadu during 2015.

Simple random sampling method was adopted to select the sample population. Totally 840 students were staying at Cuddalore, Villipuram, Thanjavur and Madurai district's ADW hostels, of that three-fifth of the inmates were selected (687) as sample population, however, 634 students completed the interview and the same was considered for the analysis.

Results: Of the total 634 students, about one-fifth of them undergoing Technical courses (ITI), and another one-third of the students was studying Science courses. The remaining 48 percent of the students belongs to faculty of Arts. The mean age of the hostel inmates was 18.9 years. An overwhelmingly majority of the students was Hindus (96.4 percent). Nuclear family system was predominating among the study population (76.8 percent). A significant proportion of the respondents' fathers (21.8 percent) and their mothers (35.8 percent) were illiterates. Majority of them depended on agricultural related activities. The average monthly family income was Rs. 4,724/-.

Socio-cultural practices towards menarche: The Indian way of life, mostly south Indian, perceives each element of an individual's life as sacred and worthy of worship and celebration. More specifically in Hindu culture, *Manjal Neerattu* function conducted as a symbol of the commencement menstruation cycle in the southern part of India. This tradition was one sole medium to announce to the entire community that their daughter has reached the age to get marriage. They celebrate it as mega event by inviting all their relatives and friends to wish their daughter. Overwhelming majority of the respondents (92.4 percent) aware of the *Manjal Neerattu* function and about 76 percent of them get involved with this celebration b their families. Another interesting point is that majority of these college going girls opinioned that this kind of celebration should be continued. It indicates that the young generation in these communities still had strong hold on socio-cultural intact with menstrual practices.

In India even mere talk about of the menses has been a taboo in the past and even to this date the cultural and social influences appear to be a hurdle for advancement of knowledge on the subject (Patil et al., 2011). In this study, totally 20 statements relating to socio-cultural taboos concerning menstruation was considered for the analysis. Students were asked to state whether it was practiced in their society.

Data regarding isolation practice, a major proportion of hostel inmates (86.1 percent) were isolated more than 14 days when they attained their first menstruation. Visiting to temple during the menstruation period was almost restricted among the study population. Similarly about 90 percent of the hostel inmates stated that they were not permitted enters into the Pooja room in their houses during the menses period. With respect to participating in functions and festivals during the menstruation time, a significant proportion of the hostel inmates reported that they were not allow to participate in the party function/festivals during the period times (56.8 percent).

Table No. 1 Percentage distribution of Students by Socio-cultural religious Practices/Taboos concerning with Menarche

No.	Socio-Cultural and Religious Practices/Taboos concerning Menarche	Yes	No	DK
	Religious related practices			
1	She should not allow to visit temple	91.2 (578)	8.0 (51)	0.8 (05)

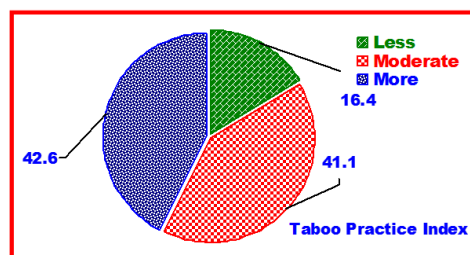
2	She should not allow to enter in Pooja room in house	90.4 (573)	9.1 (58)	0.5 (03)
3	She should not take part any functions/festivals	56.8 (360)	38.8 (246)	4.4 (28)
	Food related socio-cultural Practices			
4	She should not allow to engage in food preparation	62.9 (399)	35.2 (223)	1.9 (12)
5	She should not allow to touch cooked food	53.5 (339)	42.9 (272)	3.6 (23)
6	She should not allow to touch the vessels	54.3 (344)	41.8 (265)	3.9 (25)
7	She should Use separate utensils	48.4 (307)	47.3 (300)	4.3 (27)
8	She should not allow to eat non-veg food items	48.4 (307)	47.2 (299)	4.4 (28)
9	Dog should not allowed to eat leftover food	74.1 (470)	23.2 (147)	2.7 (17)
	Socio-cultural Practices/Taboos			
10	She should not allow to see the bird	29.8 (189)	59.3 (376)	10.9 (69)
11	She should not allow to touch Plants flowers	74.9 (475)	21.9 (139)	3.2 (20)
12	She should not allow to touch Infants	63.7 (404)	32.3 (205)	3.9 (25)
13	She should not allow to sit on Areshed	65.1 (413)	28.5 (181)	6.3 (40)
14	Widow's are not supposed to allow to see her	29.3 (186)	61.5 (390)	9.1 (58)
15	She has to take Neem twig with her while going out	54.9 (348)	40.5 (257)	4.6 (29)
16	She should Sleep separately	61.4 (389)	35.5 (225)	3.2 (20)
17	She should not allow to comb their hair	24.1 (153)	69.5 (441)	6.3 (40)
18	She should Take bath outside home	35.0 (222)	59.8 (379)	5.2 (33)
19	She should not allow to participate games	48.6 (308)	45.9 (291)	5.5 (35)
20	She should not allow to ride cycle	52.5 (333)	42.4 (269)	5.0 (32)

Data clearly explains the existence of taboos associated with food related issues among the study community. Most of the families not allow the menstruated girls to engage in the food preparation (62.9 percent) and a significant proportion of the hostel inmates not allow to touch the prepared food and the vessels (53.5 percent and 54.3 percent respectively). It is also noticed from the table that nearly half of the hostel inmates were used separate utensils during their menstrual periods (48.4 percent). Non-vegetarian food was restricted to eat for more than half of the menstruate girls. Interestingly, nearly three-fourth of the hostel inmate's societies practiced the taboo that 'Dog should not allow to eat the leftover food of the menstruate girl'. 'Menstruate women should not allow to see the bird' is another social taboo relating to menarche. About 30 percent of the hostel inmates reported that this taboo was still in practice in their communities. A major proportion of the hostel students (74.9 percent) not allow to touch the flowers during menses periods. Similarly, nearly two-third of the respondents not permitted to touch the new born babies during their menstrual periods (63.7 percent).

Another socio-cultural taboo is 'menstruate women should not sit on Areshed'. Data shows that around two-third of the hostel inmates were not allowed to sit on Areshed (65.1 percent). 'Widow's are not supposed to allow to see the menstruate girl' this type of socio-cultural restriction was not practiced much among the student's families. About 30 percent of the students reported this type of control was followed in their communities. During the menstrual days, if the menstruate girls want go out, they should keep Neem twig with them', this is another myth practiced in the society - around 60 percent of the hostel inmates was strictly followed in their society. Another regular practice in the Indian society was not allowed to share the common bed by menstruated girls during their periods. While asked about this practice little more than three-fifth of the hostel students reported that they were not allowed to sleep along with family members during their menses

days (61.4 percent). About one-fourth of the hostel inmates stated that they were not allowed to comb their hairs during the menstrual periods. It is also noticed from the table that 35 percent of the hostel inmates reported that they were not permitted to take bath inside the home bathrooms. About half of the hostel inmates stated that they were not allowed to take part in games related activities (48.6 percent) during menses periods, similarly 52.5 percent of the respondents reported that they were not permitted to ride bi-cycles during their menstrual days.

A composite index was developed to measure the level of socio-cultural taboos being practiced by the student's families at the time of menses period. The above listed 20 socio-cultural taboos statements were considered for the index construction and each statement had an alternative answer 'Yes' and 'No' (Do not know cases excluded from the analysis). The score '1' and '0' was given for practice and non-practice cases respectively. Each student was obtained the total score ranging from 0-20 which could be arbitrarily classified into three equal categories as less, moderately and more practice of socio-cultural taboos respectively. The students whose families practiced any of the 13-20 socio-cultural and religious related taboos/restriction were grouped as 'more taboo practice group' and the students who practiced any of the 7-12 taboos grouped as 'moderate taboo practice group'. The students who practiced any of the six taboos or not even practiced single taboo were grouped as 'less taboo practice group'. Data on level of socio-cultural taboos practice index discloses that more than two-fifth of the hostel inmates fall in the more of socio-cultural taboos practice index (42.6 percent) and Just 16 percent of the hostel inmates of families practiced less of socio-cultural taboos. It can be concluded that the practice of socio-cultural taboos during menstruation still dominated in the study population societies.



Conclusion: Majority of the study population families followed many restrictions and the controlled the menstruated girl's mobility and behavior. It indicates that the study society strongly believed that the women during menses are impure or unclean to perform their religious duties. This may possibly due to their ignorance and false perceptions regarding menstruation. These findings are similar to many low-income country's studies that women and girls are restricted in mobility and behavior during menstruation due to their "impurity" during menstruation (Thakur, Aronsson, Bansode, Stalsby Lundborg, Dalvie and Faxelid, 2014). Thus the above results of the study reinforce the need to educate the youth in the country about the issues and facts of menstruation, physiological implications regarding significance of menstruation and development of secondary sexual characteristics. This can be promoted and achieved through vigorous IEC activities such as like television educational program, compulsory family life education curriculum in schools and knowledgeable interactions of health personnel, teachers and parents with adolescent girls.

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