Purity and Pollution in the Construction of the Female: Rites of Menarche and Menstruation

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The Research Frontline – Journal
No.1, Vol. January (2026)
Page Number: 66 – 76

www.trfjournal.cdfaindia.org/
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18202877
TRF - J

Abstract

Historically, cultures all over the world ascribe menstruation an auspicious quality that is simultaneously worshipped and feared. The menstruating woman is a pure and holy being whose touch is somehow polluting. Menstrual taboos prevail, even in cultures that celebrate the onset of menarche. Taking the case of Assamese Hindu society, this paper tries to explore this juxtaposition through Victor Turner's ideas of the liminal being and Mary Douglas' conception of purity and pollution. Menstrual taboos thrive in Assamese culture, even as they celebrate *tuloni biya* (small wedding) when a girl reaches menarche, and worship the goddess Kamkhya's menstrual cycle. The argument is made that menstrual rites actively construct the idea of the female. Gender is constructed through this cyclical ritual to remind women of their biological destiny as child bearers and nurturers. The taboos become a way to punish the woman for 'wasting' her egg that month by not fertilizing it. The contradiction of purity and pollution arises from and perpetuates this idea of a powerful sexual female that must be tamed and controlled. The woman is thus reminded of her role to continue her husband's bloodline in the heteropatriarchal structure, affecting her self-perception. The conclusion explores how even as celebrations like *tuloni biya* decline, taboos continue to exist, perhaps affirming the idea of control as the primary motive of menstrual rituals. Menstrual rites become a tool in the hands of a heteropatriarchal structure to ensure women perform their duty of kinship production.

Keywords

Menstruation rites, menarche, gender construction, taboos, *tuloni biya*

Introduction

Many cultures all over the world mark the onset of puberty in girls through rites and rituals. Menarche, or the first menstrual period, is ascribed an auspicious quality that is simultaneously powerful and polluting. Menarche is rejoiced because the girl is now 'flowering' and capable of producing 'fruit',

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that is, fertile, and capable of bearing children (Dube, 1988). But every menstrual period after is regarded with suspicion and considered taboo. For the now pubescent girl, celebration is juxtaposed with seclusion. Hindu Assamese society cradles this contradiction. Unlike the customs of the Brahmins in north India that treat the onset of puberty as a hushed secret, menarche is marked by the joyous celebration of *tuloni biya* (small wedding). But this does not allow the women to escape the taboo of pollution surrounding menstruation. This paper tries to explain this phenomena through Victor Turner's idea of liminality and Mary Douglas' explanations of purity and pollution. The argument is made that the rites actively construct the idea of the female in any given society through these rituals, or a "stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1988). This contradiction arrives as a result of, and actively constructs, the idea of a powerful female sexual power that must be tamed and controlled. The symbolic behaviour of the menstrual rites becomes an ideological commitment to public morality (Asad, 1988), constructing the female to maintain the heteropatriarchal structure, ensuring the continuation of the kinship system.

Mitoo Das' multiple works on the culture around menstruation have been referred to in this paper, supplemented by other works on *tuloni biya.* Works on the menstruation rites of *Nkula* (Turner, 1966) have been used to better situate the Assamese perception of menstruation in the wider context of womanhood. Aside from Judith Butler, Leela Dube and Julia Leslie are referred to to better understand gender construction specific to Hinduism. Iris Young's work on women's self-perception of female fragility is explored in the context of menstruation.

Why Tuloni Biya?

For this paper, Assamese menstruation rites have been chosen because they represent the way purity and pollution interact and often contradict in liminal spaces. Menstruation is simultaneously seen as auspicious and polluting. There are many taboos and restrictions. For the first three days, the menstruating woman is isolated in a separate room and made to sleep on a bed made of straw. She cannot touch anything, and anything she does touch must be cleansed with holy water as her touch is polluting. She can only eat fruits and simple boiled food, in separate utensils that she must wash herself. She cannot enter any other rooms of the house for the first three days. From the fourth day, as the bleeding is less, she may enter the rooms but must carry her own stool to sit on. But the kitchen and prayer rooms are forbidden to her till the bleeding has stopped completely, or the eighth day (Das, 2008).

Despite this, menstruation is also celebrated. In Assam, menstruation is associated with the goddess Kamakhya. It is believed that when the goddess Sati immolated herself due to her father disrespecting

her husband, Lord Shiva, Shiva went mad with grief, unleasing his destruvtive Rudra form. To stop his rampage, the gods dismembered her into 52 pieces and each place where a piece fell became a holy site of the feminine force of *shakti.* The *yoni*, or cervix, fell where the Kamakhya temple now stands. In fact Kamakhya is not presented as an idol, but a block of stone with a crevice, kept moist and smeared with vermillion (Pradhan, 2021). She is believed to have a year-long cycle with her menstrual period occurring in June. This is the monsoon season, where the goddess' menstruating is actually the whole earth 'menstruating', that is, the rains. Her fertility symbolizes the fertility of the earth. This is commemorated through the celebration of the Ambubachi Mela. The Kamakhya temple is closed for the first three days, similar to a woman being isolated for the first three days of her cycle. Agricultural and ritual activities are not performed. The 'plough may not penetrate the soil' when the goddess is menstruating, paralleled to sexual intercourse being forbidden when the woman menstruates (Leslie, 1996). On the fourth day, the temple reopens and there is a grand celebration. A cloth soaked in red is kept as *prasad*, representing menstrual blood. This is ironic, considering the pollutant label given to it. (Das, 2008). In a later paper from 2014, Mitoo Das reflects on her own work on menstruation in Assam, adding that despite the taboos, Ambabuchi provides a space where the maternal and sexual aspects of women are celebrated as divine.

This contrasts menstruation and menarche rites in the Hindu communities of North India, especially Brahminical beliefs. While society is rife with taboos, menarche celebrations are not part of the culture. The origin of menstruation is not linked to a goddess, but to the god Indra. It is said that Indra killed Visvarupa, a Brahmin and was cursed as a result. Pleading for forgiveness, part of his curse was offloaded to the woman- an inherently 'wicked' and promiscuous being. This led to the monthly menstruation of the 'fetus-killers', as each menstrual period represents an egg that could have been fertilized as a child. Caste weaves itself into the conceptions of menstruation. It is advised that upper caste men not engage in intercourse with their wives during menses, as a child conceived during menses would be 'cursed with untouchability'. (Leslie, 1996). Caste creates differences within Assam as well. While *tuloni biya* is celebrated with grandeur among most Hindu Assamese communities, it is a more subdued affair among the Brahmins. They call it *shanti biya*, because the fact that the girl is now fertile is a matter of relief, rather than celebration (Das, 2025).

Description of *Tuloni Biya*

Tuloni biya is a ritual marking menarche, a celebration of a girl's entry into womanhood. It can be considered a rite of passage, that is, a transition from one status to another (Van Gennep, as cited in Goswami and Singh, 2023). Van Gennep's framework of rites of passage can be used to explain *tuloni biya.* The first three days are the separation or the preliminal period. The girl is separated from the rest

of society. She is made to sleep in a separate room on a bed of hay. She is not allowed to interact with any men. Even women are to keep distant from her. She cannot see the sun or moon. She may only leave the room to use the washroom, and she must not touch anything on her way. She cannot touch anything in the house, including her own things. The girl is often kept home from school. Her path must be sprinkled with holy water. During this time, she can only eat fruits, in utensils she has to clean herself. She cannot cut her nails. One is also not allowed to cut nails on a birthday because it is believed in certain sects of Hinduism that it can stunt growth. In this case, the fear is that it will stunt the girl's growth into a woman. Ceremonial offerings are kept in the eastern part of the room facing the sun- rice seeds, betel leaves and an earthen lamp.

On the fourth day, she enters the liminal or marginal stage of the rite. She has crossed the threshold of girlhood, but has not yet entered the realm of womanhood. She can now consume boiled food, with no or minimal oil and spices. She is given a ritual bath to cleanse her of her pollution. This bath is given by older women who have already achieved motherhood. Men are not involved in the ceremony. This bath is given in front of a banana tree which will go on to represent a groom on the seventh day.

On the seventh day, the reincorporation or postliminal stage of the rite begins. This is the day of celebration of *tuloni biya*, as the girl has now entered a new status of womanhood. The girl is dressed as a bride in the traditional Assamese garment, *mekhela chador*, and wears gold jewelry. Here too, the women conduct the rites with the assistance of a male priest. A motif is created on the floor with an idol of a Hindu god placed in the centre. The girl is then wed to the banana tree. Three red dots are made on it, representing the energy of the three gods. The bananas represent the male organ, and the girl holds a small doll, representing a baby (Goswami and Singh, 2023).

The priest then determines what kind of *kanya* (girl) the girl will be, according to what time of the day she began her menstruation. The best scenario is if she starts menstruating early in the morning which makes her a *padmini kanya*, and she will lead a peaceful life. If she started after nine, but before noon, she is *siprani kanya*, making her mischievous like the hustle and bustle of the day. If it was the afternoon, she would be *ugro kanya*, making her 'hot' and angry like the heat of the day. The one who starts in the evening is considered the most unlucky. She is *hostini kanya*, and all the tensions of the day have accumulated in her body. According to this time, as well as other planetary considerations (particularly the position of mars), the priest prescribes a fast to the girl. The exact diet ranges but is always vegetarian and the time may range from anywhere between three days to a year (Das, 2025).

The celebration includes a feast. While women play an active role, men play the passive role of guests. Guests who are invited typically give gifts to the girl, and sweets are distributed. Leela Dube points out that these gifts are symbols of the new role the girl is entering. The celebratory nature of the

'small wedding' entirely mimics the celebration of marital or 'big' weddings in Assam.

The purpose of the ceremony is to welcome the girl into womanhood, prepare her for its challenges, and bless her with fertility (Goswami and Singh, 2023). Historically, it was to announce to the community that the girl is ready for marriage. Ritual becomes a language through which the private becomes publicly accessible, ensuring social communication (Asad, 1988). The family wishes to share with the community that the girl is now capable of producing heirs. However, this principle is not overtly expressed anymore due to reduction of child marriages, as well as a fast declining age for menarche (Harrell, 1981). In some communities where child marriage was more prevalant, the girl may already have been married but would move into her marital home after the onset of menarche. This is similar to *Chisungu*, the menstrual rite of the Bemba where the girl is already married and the puberty ritual is to send her to her marital home. Food restrictions are also similar- both cultures advise avoiding foods that emit 'heat' (Richards, 1956).

Tuloni biya can therefore be understood as a ritual of status elevation as classified by Victor Turner. It is also a life-crisis rite (Warner, 1959 as cited in Turner, 1967). This is because it is a public ritual to announce the status elevation of an individual.

After the first menstruation, women in Assam are expected to follow the taboos of menstruation every month till menopause, though they are not as restricting. There is no celebration, except for during June, when the taboos may be stricter and women celebrate the goddess Kamakhya during the Ambubachi mela.

Menarche as a Site of Liminality: Purity and Pollution

The ideas of purity and pollution govern menstrual rites in a complex way. It seems that the menstruating woman is both auspicious and polluting. As mentioned above, her fertility is celebrated but she is still considered a polluting force. The happiness that the girl is now fertile is intertwined with fears of being 'barren' (infertile) and not securing a groom. A pre-pubescent girl is considered the purest form of womanhood- so much so that she is often sent with the menstruating woman to offset her polluting effect (Dube, 1988). The reason for her purity is the fact that she is not yet a sexual being. A girl reaching menarche is finally fulfilling her purpose by gaining the power she is supposed to- but there are fears of her misusing or not using this power.

This idea is not unique to Assam or even Hinduism. Victor Turner made similar observations in his works on the Ndembu. They have a ritual called Nkula to help a girl with excessive menstrual bleeding. Similar to *tuloni biya,* the girl is handed a doll representing a baby. She wears a red feather on her hair during the ceremony, representing menstrual blood.

Turner then tries to isolate this element of the red feather to understand what the rite means by deconstructing it. He notes that although the ceremony seems to be celebrating a feminine force, the same feather is worn exclusively by male hunters. The girl even performs a dance with a bow and arrow. This is because in the minds of the Ndembu, she is behaving like a male killer and not a female nurturer. By 'allowing' her menstrual period to happen, she has wasted her egg which was a potential baby. Each menstrual period is a reminder that she is not fulfilling her purpose of childbearing. This is similar to menstruating women being deemed 'fetus killers' in Hinduism.

Turner then further isolates the colour red. He notes that red is seen as both a companion and opposing force to white. White is seen as pure. Red, on the other hand, is seen as powerful. Power is generally considered morally grey- it can be used for good or bad. He says this is often seen in other cultures as well, including Hinduism, saying that it is seen as the colour of energy. Although he calls it the 'ancient world', this is true even today. Red is generally associated with power in Hinduism and a force for change. It is a colour often adorned by warrior goddesses like Durga. It can be the blood of kinship, or it can be the blood of violence. This is why menstrual blood is 'red'- not just physically, but symbolically. A girl reaching menarche now has the power to continue her bloodline, but also the power *not* to. This is why *tuloni biya* is rejoiced because the woman is now fertile. But every consequent period is punished. It is a reminder that the woman is choosing not to procreate and wasting her fertility. Across Hindu subcultures a woman's purpose is seen as childbirth (Dube, 1988).

It is interesting to note that the Nkula is a smaller ritual. For the Ndembu, the girl's main puberty ritual, Nkang'a, happens when she develops breasts. This is because breastfeeding and nurturing and raising the child is seen as the main function of the woman, rather than birthing it. The Ndembu are matrilineal, and therefore tend to center the mother-child bond. On the other hand, the mother-child bond is not seen as completely 'pure' in Hinduism and the father-child bond takes precedence in this patrilineal society. Furthermore, sperm is seen as better than menstrual blood, but still a polluting substance (Leslie, 1996). This contrasts with the Ndembu who view sperm as pure (Turner, 1966).

The girl undergoing *tuloni biya* is therefore a liminal being as defined by Turner in *Forest of Symbols.* She is no longer classified- not a girl, but not yet a woman. She has no property- she is not allowed to use her own room, bed or things. She has the power to pollute. Mary Douglas explores this idea of pollution as being 'potent'. Her power is dormant and not something she has the agency to wield, but only the agency to tame. The danger, therefore, lies in *not* taming it. Power is good when vested in legitimate authority but dangerous when acquired by a person in a subordinate position- which a woman is. Her egg, too, is dangerous as it is something dead that never lived. And the liminal is always dangerous because it puts the structure in question. The liminal being has a position in the *larger* structure of society, but is not performing their role in a crucial substructure (Douglas, 1966). In

this case, a woman is expected to menstruate. But by not fertilizing her egg she is failing her duty as the carrier of the bloodline. She is therefore putting the kinship structure in danger. The rites performed in this situation involve behaving anti-socially as "an expression of the marginal condition" (Douglas, 1966). For a menstruating woman, the anti-social behaior is not entering the kitchen or the prayer house, and not having sexual relations with her husband. The purpose of rituals such as *tuloni biya*, is to take the 'not-yet-girl-but-not-yet-woman' into the more defined status of a woman, as according to Douglas, liminal rites are to ease transitions.

Construction of the female

A menstruating girl is also not a complete 'woman' as she is not using her fertility to reproduce. Her gender is therefore in question, as is the case for liminal beings (Turner, 1966). It can be argued that construction of the female sex is one of the prime reasons for this rite.

The anthropologist Barbara Harrell has tried to explore this question. She refutes other theories of menstrual rites. Many scholars have tried to attribute the worldwide taboo around menstruation to vaginal or womb envy, Karen Horney's gender reversal of the Freudian concept of penis envy. According to this, men are envious of the primal bond a mother experiences with the child she grows in her own womb, and then births and nurtures with her own body. The claim is that womb envy leads to a degradation of biological functions associated with the female which gave rise to menstrual taboos. But Harrell rejects this (Harrell, 1981).

She says that it is about returning a woman to her fertile state. This is similar to Turner's understanding of menstrual rites being performed to punish the woman for not fertilizing the egg she menstruated. Harrell rejects the idea of menses as the crux of womanhood and even deems pregnancy as 'parasitic' to the pregnant person. She says that womanhood is symbolically defined, rather than biologically.

This conception of gender is similar to Judith Butler's. They say that gender as an identity is not a natural phenomena, but is actively created through a "stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1988). Menstrual rites are an example of such acts cyclically enacted every month to remind the woman of her biological destiny. Emphasizing on the temporal and collective aspects of gender, they refer to Victor Turner and say that social action requires ritual and repeated performance. They theorize that gender roles are actively constructed to fulfil the heterosexual contract, which in turn ensures the reproduction of the kinship system. Not only gender, but even biological sex is specifically constructed as a clearly demarcated binary in service of the preservation of heterosexuality (Butler, 1990). Referring to Michel Foucault, Butler states that sex is artificially produced through power relations as regulative. Sex is the political use of the category of nature. It imposes an artificial unity on a set of attributes that are otherwise discontinuous. Neutral physical characteristics are marked by the social

system and interpreted in a gendered fashion. Monique Wittig refers to sex as a forcibly imposed abstraction as a result of a violent process. This imposition makes sex into a reified reality (Witting, 1980 as cited in Butler, 1990).

Performance of rites like *tuloni biya* become a gateway to access this imposed, larger-than-life idea of sex and gender. These performative and communicative acts both express and create gender. In fact, Butler's conception of gender as a performance is similar to the way Geertz conceived religion. They call gender a "compelling illusion and an object of belief" (Butler, 1988), referring to him directly. Although they do not refer to his concepts of 'model for' and 'model of', its influence is detectable. They say the repetition of gendered rites derives from meanings already socially embedded in the structure, but these rites also actively create meaning. This is also how Geertz imagined religion- a system of symbols creating meaning (Geertz, 1973). Butler is careful to point out that people are not passive recipients of gender, but their performances actively create the 'gender reality' they supposedly reveal. Their theorizing of gender almost mirrors theoretical explorations of religion, almost as if they view it *as* one. But that is a topic for another paper.

This active creation of gender is also noted by Leela Dube, as well as Mitoo Das. She points out that the men she interviewed for her work on menstrual taboos did not seem very concerned with the details of the norms followed by the women. She applied Foucault's idea of the docile body internalizing the (heteropatriarchal) gaze, as the women themselves are part of the structure imposing restrictions on them.

This heteropatriarchal gaze turns voyeuristic. The woman begins existing in distance from herself and self-perception turns into an act of surveillance. The woman performs repetitive acts to prove her femaleness, such as menstrual taboos. Iris Young explores how women tend to view their body as a fragile burden rather than a medium for aims. They tend to imagine the world in terms of its limits rather than its possibilities, reflecting their experience of confinement, whether that be during menstruation or otherwise. They also tend to have a greater fear of getting hurt (Young, 1980). Menstrual rites would add to this idea. Even when such taboos are rationalized through rest, they reinforce the fragility of the female body. This is not to say that menstruation is not physically painful. But when a cyclical pain is presented as inherently gendered and tied to identity, it affects the perception of the self.

Moreover, menstruation is presented in these rites as a loss, or failure of fertilization. The desired result is an offspring, and monthly bleeding is a proof of failure. Not just rites, even medical textbooks tend to present menstruation in negative terms, using vocabulary such as 'diminished', 'disintegration' and 'debris'. This directly contrasts with how digestion is described, even though it is physiologically a

similar process (Martin, 1987). This creates the perception of menstruation as an affliction rather than a routine bodily process, circling back to women viewing their bodies as something to cope with, rather than a means to an end.

Conclusion

In recent times, there has been a decline in the *tuloni biya* celebrations. Multiple reasons can be speculated. One is that increasing division of labour relegates liminality to the religious sections of society, and loses its relevance in the larger structure (Turner, 1967). Another is increasing Brahminization of Hindu society. As mentioned before, Brahmin culture does not celebrate menarche, but still follows taboos. This can explain how even though *tuloni biya* declines, the taboos around menstruation continue. They have been rationalized as women needing rest, rather than ideas of pollution (Das, 2014). But whether women are segregated for their polluting powers or their supposed well-being, the result is materially the same- exclusion and discrimination. Douglas had pointed out that pollution is used to legitimize discrimination against the liminal. But now that that may not work everywhere, especially with the modern urban career-woman, discrimination is legitimized through the weaponization of concern. This concern, even if well meaning, can perpetuate the idea of female fragility.

Women being seen as fragile coexists uncomfortably with women having sexual power that must be tamed. How can society live in fear of something it views as inherently weak? Assamese menstrual rites try to bridge this contradiction. Menarche is celebrated because it is proof you can reproduce. Menses are punished because it is proof you did not.

Pain and discomfort entangle with the self-image of women. Fear of female agency has led to a gender construction of women as passive beings. The female body becomes an object who things happen *to*, juxtaposed with being a subject who initiations action (Young, 1980). Menstrual taboos become a way to manage and cope with a body that continuously betrays its inhabitant. The language and rituals around menstruation result in menses being a monthly reminder of undeniable femaleness and womanhood, one that is imposed. The only agency a woman has is to circumvent her destiny of reproduction. Even in rebellion, the woman can work against reproduction, but not independent of it.

Another rationalization of menstrual taboos is the emphasis of difference over discrimination- the idea of the two sexes being ‘separate but equal’. The same statement was used to justify racial segregation, so one can understand how ‘equal’ this truly is. One’s femininity is often defined and interrogated based on submissiveness and reproductive prowess. As Leela Dube points out, femininity is carefully constructed down to every minute detail. This leads to women walking on eggshells desperately trying to prove their womanhood, being feminine but not too sexual when femininity has been inherently

constructed as sexual in our cultures, specifically Hindu culture. This inherent sexuality is considered impure, and it is this pollution that is leaving the body during menses (Leslie, 1996). Women trying to prove their womanhood only continues to perpetuate the idea of the female being defined by her reproductive function. By actively creating their gender through such taboos, women often end up creating their own cage.

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