

# **Stigmatization of Menstruation and Women Subordination- A Comparative Study between Dagiapara Village and Guwahati City**

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## ***Abstract***

*Stigmatization of menstruation can be found in both rural and urban areas in Assam. But differences exist at the level of maintenance and internalization of these stigmas among women in both these areas. The main reasons behind these differences are education and economic independence of women. Patriarchal society plays a very important role regarding the continuation of the process of stigmatization of menstruation. The proposed study try to analyse the factors responsible for the continuation of these stigmas and also about the factors that plays a role in creating differences in the level of maintaining these stigmas between rural and urban areas in Assam*

*Keywords-* menstruation, stigmas, patriarchy, subordination

## **Introduction-**

In Assamese society, menstruation is surrounded with many stigmas. Many restrictions are put on most of the women during these days. Especially in rural areas menstruation is treated as something impure, unholy and a matter of shame. Women are not allowed to talk about their menstruation publicly, especially in front of male members. Even if they face any problem regarding menstruation, it is not allowed to discuss about it publicly. These problems are termed as so called 'women issues' which should be discussed secretly. Women are not allowed to go in public places, ceremonies, to read, to travel by vehicles, to stay with others, to eat many things and so on. Even in many cases, girls are not allowed to seat in exams during their first menstruation which is celebrated on the one hand as TULONI BIYA and on the other hand through this process she is alienated from others because of which she has to remain in the same class for another year. These restrictions create obstacles in the way of achieving gender equity.

Stigmas are prevalent in rural as well as in urban areas; only difference is in amount of restrictions because of education and economic independence of women. Education helps in creating awareness among people about what menstruation actually is. Financial independence of women makes them conscious about their needs and necessities in menstruation days and enables them to take care of themselves as they do not have to depend on others to take care of their necessary things.

This study is conducted in a small village name 'DAGIAPARA', situated in Dipila Mauza, Darrang District, Assam [rural area] and in Chandmari, Guwahati situated in Kamrup Metro, Assam [urban area].

To justify these arguments, findings are presented below:

- **Views of Women of the Village Regarding Menstruation Stigmas-**

**Table-1**

Age group	Number of respondents	Educated women	Uneducated women	Working women	Housewives	Number of women who use sanitary napkins	Number of women who do not use sanitary napkins
10-20	5	5	-	-	-	5	-
20-30	6	6	-	1	1	6	1
30-40	5	5	-	3	2	4	1
More than 40	9	7	2	1	8	1	7

As showed in the above mentioned TABLE – 1, 25 respondents among 50 have been taken from DAGIAPARA village, which is situated in Darrang District, Assam. Puberty age is considered as 10. Interview is taken in 15 families. Here, respondents are divided in 4 age groups. 5 respondents are from 10-20 age group,

6 respondents belong to 20-30 age group, 30-40 age group have 5 respondents and 9 respondents are more than 40 years. Among 25 respondents, there is 2 uneducated women who are more than 40 age; there is 5 working women; 10 girls who are studying; 1 unmarried aged women, nearly 55 age; others are housewives.

It has been seen that women of the Dagiapara village are subjected to the menstruation stigmas. Most of the girls who have just reached their puberty age, they do not have any idea about what menstruation actually is. They simply know that it is something during which one cannot go to the temple, cannot take part in ceremonies, public gatherings, cannot touch others, cannot stay with others, cannot eat many things and in some cases they are not even allowed to go to school. When they have their first menstruation, it is called as 'TULONI BIYA'. During these days, they have to maintain lots of rules. They are not allowed to go outside the room, to eat rice, to bath, to see male members etc. Most importantly, they are not even allowed to seat for exams during these days as there is believes like if they go out of the room and see male members then it will affect in future. So at any cost, they have to stay in that room for four days without seeing outside. When I have taken interview, 1 girl said that they she even had to remain in the same class because of her 'TULONI BIYA'. In the fourth day, they take bath. This day is celebrated. She is made up to look like a bride. People bring gift for her. From then, when girls menstruate every month, they are subjected to some restrictions but less than first time.

The educated girls who are belong to 10-20 and 20-30 age groups know about the importance of maintaining hygienic conditions in menstruation days because they come through these issues in their books. Most of the girls use sanitary napkins as shown in the above mentioned table. But many of them internalize these stigmas so heartily that they cannot come out of these totally in the real sense. They still maintain the restrictions as they believed that if they do not follow the restrictions, something bad will happen. When I have taken interview, it has been found that they find difficulties in maintain stigmas but in mind they also accept menstruation as something impure, unholy.

The women who are married, they are more subjected to these restrictions than unmarried girls. They are not allowed to stay with their husband during

menstruation as it may affect him. In many cases, it has been found that mother-in-law is very strict in maintaining these rules to their daughter-in-law but same woman is relaxed to some extent in case of their daughters. When they face problems, most of the time, related to menstruation, they are not allowed to tell their husbands as these problems are considered as 'WOMEN'S PROBLEM'. Very few women use sanitary napkins (as shown in the above table). Most of them use clothes. Women are not allowed to dry their used clothes in the rays of sun in front of others because they believe that if a man see this, it will be bad for him. So they cannot clean and dry these clothes properly and used it again because of which various infections are caused. They are not bothered about use of sanitary napkins and if they bother, their family does not consider it as important. On the basis of collected data as presented above, it can be concluded that unmarried girls use sanitary napkins more than the married women comparatively.

Women who are engaged in profession, they use sanitary napkins than the housewives and maintain less amount of restrictions as they have to go to their work in these days also. In the families which have only 2 to 4 members, they have to do the things. They have to make food for themselves. Simply they do not go to temples or that place of the home where they use to pray. In other aspects, they do not follow restrictions. The scenario is different in the case of house wives. They have to maintain all the rules. In these days, many of them even do not take bath. In the third day only, they wash all their clothes, clean the room where they stay in these days. From the 5<sup>th</sup> day only, they can enter into the kitchen. During the menstruation days, they do not use 'sindur', as 'sindur' is considered as something which is pure. So they do not touch it during their so called impure days. Moreover, in the where mother in laws, grandmothers stay, rules are stricter. Many times it is seen that, in their menstruation days, women are not allowed to enter into kitchen, but she has to do all the works other than that which are heavier than cooking. People are not concern about her health but the belief about how menstruation can negatively affect others. Most importantly, menstruation is considered as a matter of shame which cannot be seen by the male members.

Mothers are comparatively conscious about the periods in two families; their needs, cleanliness are taken into account. But in other families, parents are

still cannot come out of these believes. Girls also, although they are educated, cannot come out completely from these stigmas. They are brought up in such a way that they also consider it, to extent, as a matter of impurity. Someway or other they had in their mind that menstruation is impure.

- **Urban Women's Views on Menstruation Stigmas -**

**Table – 2**

Age group	Number of respondents	Educated women	Uneducated women	Working women	Housewives	No of women who use sanitary napkins	No of women who don't use sanitary napkins
10-20	5	5	-	-	-	5	-
20-30	6	6	-	-	-	6	-
30-40	8	8	-	7	1	8	-
More than 40	6	6	-	4	2	6	1

As presented in the above TABLE – 2, 25 respondents have been taken from Guwahati. Among them, 5 respondents belong to 10- -20 age group, 7 respondents have been selected from 20-30 age group, 7 respondents have taken from 30- 40 age group and 6 respondents are more than 40 age. Interviews are taken from 10 families. Among these 25 women, there are 11 working women; one unmarried woman, 3 housewives and others are students.

In comparison to the rural area, consciousness among women regarding menstruation is more. In the Guwahati area, sanitary pad is used by most of the women as presented in the above TABLE 2. They are concerned about their health issues. In most of the families, both husband and wife engage in profession. So they cannot maintain all the rules of not touching others, not going to kitchen, not staying with others etc. except entering into the temple. In the families where women do not work, there also less rules as the men go out for job and she has to

maintain other works. But in some families, where there is more members like mother-in-law, sister-in-law, restrictions are maintained as –mother-in-law does not like to allow her daughter-in-law to enter into kitchen as she believed it as something that will affect others, specially her son. They are concerned about problems relating to menstruation. Young generation is more liberal towards the issue of stigmas here. They do not consider menstruation as a matter of shame. Most of the people here is educated. So they know what menstruation actually is.

The young girls of Guwahati area who have just attained their puberty age, they know what menstruation actually is. Celebration of first puberty or TULONI BIYA is also there. Girls are not allowed to go outside in these days, she cannot even seat for exams, she cannot see male members, and she cannot take bath in these four days. Here also, the girl is made up as bride in the fourth day. She is gifted by others. But after the first menstruation, rules are less than rural areas. They are allowed to go to school, tuitions etc. unlike village in most of the things. They are allowed to stay with others, to eat things which are not allowed in rural areas. They do not simply take it as a matter of shame. Most of the educated young girls do not follow the stigmas related to menstruation. They almost come out of thinking it as impure. They go to their educational institutions, eat outside, use vehicles etc.

Most of the women in Guwahati areas are engaged in profession. So, they have to go to their work. So they cannot follow all the rules as in the case of village. Moreover, the house wives are also not subjected to these rules like in villages because most of the families in Guwahati areas are single family. They have only 3 to 5 members mostly. She has to maintain all the household work. She cannot wait for others to do the things for her. When I have collected data, it has been seen that in 3 families where mother in grandparents stay, rules are strict comparatively as they believe menstruation as impure and do not allow their daughter in laws and granddaughter to do many things as it may hamper her son and grandson. Most of the unmarried aged women are also not so much strict in maintaining these rules regarding menstruation. She goes to go to work. When I have taken interview one such woman says that she does not believe it as a matter

of shame. She puts importance on maintaining healthy conditions in these days and not goes to temple. But she used to go to kitchen.

- **Differences between Educated and Uneducated women in their Views Regarding Menstruation:**

From the collected data, it has been found that educated women of both rural and urban areas are comparatively conscious about the reality of menstruation. They do not think of it as dirty, unholy. They do not consider menstruating women as impure. They know that it is just a biological process of every woman which implies their sign of achieving motherhood. They take care of themselves by maintaining cleanliness, using sanitary napkins, eating healthy foods. They are less bothered about the stigmas related to menstruation. They do not consider menstruation as a weakness of women.

On the other hand, most of the uneducated women is filled with many assumptions and believes regarding menstruation. They are more conscious about menstruation stigmas prevalent in society. They conceptualize menstruation more as a social rather than a biological process. They accept the patriarchal society's conception of considering women as weak because of menstruation rather than recognizing their differences. They are more concerned about maintaining stigmas than their health issues because of which many of them suffer from menstruation related diseases. Many of them maintain these stigmas willingly also as they internalize believes regarding negative impact of menstruation.

Educated women are conscious about their rights and necessities. If they are forced to maintain all these stigmas which pose a challenge to their lives, they do not take it as normal. But uneducated women do not, in fact, know about all the rights which are available to them. They obey all the restrictions as take it as normal. They do not understand the fact that they are subordinated or somewhere fear is in the whole process of following these stigmas rather than their willingness.

- **Differences between Economically Independent and Dependent Women Regarding Menstruation Stigmas**

Economically independent women are less subjected to these stigmas of menstruation. As they do not have to depend on others for financial help, they are relatively forced less to maintain these stigmas by others. When interviews are taken it has been found from their views that economic independence of women carries importance of their needs and wishes. They do not have to wait for others to take care of themselves. They can do their own without depending on others for financial help. For example, they can buy sanitary napkins for themselves, they can go to hospital if they face any difficulties whereas these issues are usually considered as women issues and do not get attention of the patriarchal society. Moreover, when she is engaged in a job, she has to go to her workplace in spite of maintaining all the stigmas by staying at home which happens in the case of housewives. Society also does not blame them immediately which are, in contrast, different in the cases of women who are financially weak.

On the other hand, economically dependent women are subjected to these stigmas more as they cannot decide anything for themselves, which are related to money. Her needs, views are also ignored. For example, buying sanitary napkins is not considered as much important. If a women suffers from periods pain, menopause, irregular periods; these are accepted as women issues. But most of cases the fact that these issues are related with a woman's life is ignored by simply termed these as 'women issues'. Most of village women, in fact, still hide these issues from male members as they feel shame to share these issues with men. They are socially and psychologically conditioned in such a way that they themselves accept 'not giving importance to these things' as normal. Most of the family members also do not take these issues seriously and think that spending money in these things as meaningless. Society also more concerned in searching the fault of these poor women than that of independent women.

Moreover, it has been found that those women who depend on others for financial support do not have the courage to raise their voice for their needs. They do not want to go against others as they have fear of losing that support completely. In many cases they think that asking for their necessities may be an extra burden for the family. So they simply try to adjust with what they have by taking it as normal. But economically independent women do not have to think

about all these issues. So, economically dependent women have very different views about these stigmas than economically well off women.

- **Role of Patriarchal Society in Continuing Menstruation Stigmas:**

Patriarchy is not all about men's domination over women. Rather it is about the system which provides supremacy to men and thus, led to the subordination of women. Women also play important role in the maintenance of patriarchy. It has been seen that women are too responsible as much as men in maintaining these stigmas. In spite of being a woman, they do not try to understand the different needs of women in menstruation days in most of the cases. When I have collected data, many girls said that they are introduced to these stigmas by their female relatives mostly by their grandmothers. They are taught not to touch others, stay away from others, not going to schools etc. they are taught not to speak about menstruation in public as it is a 'women matter'. They said that they are taught not to ask their father, brother to buy sanitary napkins as it should not be touched by a man. Moreover, it has been found that daughter- in- laws are more subjected to these stigmas by their mother- in- laws in most of the times. Mother- in- laws are more strict in maintaining these stigmas than father-in-laws. Thus, women are equally responsible for the continuance of these menstruation stigmas as that of man.

Therefore from the findings, it can be said that there are differences between the women of the village and women of the city regarding stigmas related to menstruation. Education and economic independence play major roles in creating these differences. Patriarchal society always tries to subordinate women and menstruation stigmas are used as a way of subordinating them.

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