

**AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT ON SENSING THE
DIMENSIONS OF MENSTRUAL BEHAVIOUR AMONG
THE GIRL STUDENTS OF A GOVERNMENT COLLEGE OF
PURBA MEDINIPUR, WEST BENGAL**

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

This is to certify that **SMT. DEBIKA DUARY**, University Roll. 1126116 No. 200002, Registration No. 1160423 (Session: 2020-2021) a student of the Department of Anthropology of this College did her compulsory fieldwork of B.Sc. (Hons.) Semester-VI, Subject-Anthropology, Paper-DSE-4 and prepared this report entitled as "**An Ethnographic Account on Sensing the Dimensions of Menstrual Behaviour among the Girl Students of a Government College of Purba Medinipur, West Bengal**" under the guidance and supervision by the undersigned.

She was very sincere and dutiful during the fieldwork and preparation of the report. I wish her every success in life.


09.08.2023

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INTRODUCTION

Ethnography is life as text. It is not part of ethnographic procedure to manipulate or experimentally induce certain human behavior. Rather, anthropologists work in natural communities. Ethnography, the study of people in a natural setting, provides an opportunity for researchers to conduct a detailed study of a group of people while being immersed in the culture of that group. Ethnography (*ethno*, "people" or "folk," and *graphy*, "to describe something") involves the study of people or an organization through face-to-face interactions in a real-life social setting. There is no deductive hypothesis to follow or any statistical formula. Over time, this interaction yields a rich and detailed account of the culture, history, and characteristics of a social phenomenon. Ethnographers not only describe the facts but also explain them, they want to know why such rituals, customs, beliefs present there. Because- "An explanation is an answer to a WHY question." The ethnographer is ultimately interested in the processes and circumstances that produce that culture. Appropriate analysis of these products can tell us about ideas, languages, gender relations, economics, and so on. Ethnography not only focuses ideas and symbols but also on material objects that surround the informant and researcher.

One of the major challenges before every adolescent girl is to handle menstruation (Therese & Maria, 2010), which is a normal body function in females. Menstruation is an important reproductive health function, yet it has been dealt with secrecy in India (United Nations Children's Fund, 2008). A number of studies have been conducted among the college going girls in India from different research perspectives to attain the issues like- the knowledge, beliefs, myths and prior source of information regarding menstruation among the college girls, the prevalence and patterns of menstrual problems and complaints, and to study hygiene and treatment seeking practices regarding menstruation (Sachdeva & Sharma, 2017). Thus came, the present ethnography seeks to explore the perception and multiple dimensions of menstrual behaviour among the girl students of Haldia Government College of Purba Medinipur, West Bengal. To indicate a very microscopic outlook of the present concern will incline primarily among the girl students of the Department of Anthropology of the mentioned college with an expectation to provide rich details on the knowledge on the concerned issue.

THE OBJECTIVES

1. To understand the perception and dimensions of menstrual behaviour among the girl and to students under study
2. To sense how the participants manage their daily living during the menstrual period?
3. To identify the major challenges of the participants about the menstrual period and to contribute in-depth knowledge for better policy and action.

METHODOLOGY

The present research is grounded by the ethnographic approach and methods, which become the principal pathway for collecting, sorting and interpreting data and in which an ethnographer senses to be applicable as the exploration progresses (Murchison, 2010). Methodologically this research is further subdivided into the following categories-

The Area and the People under Study

The ethnographer purposively selects a Government College, namely Haldia Government College of Purba Medinipur, West Bengal to conduct the fieldwork among ten (10) girl students from semester-VI, IV, and II of the department of Anthropology of the concerned college.

Sampling

Convenient sampling is the principle sampling method through which participants has been selected for in-depth semi structured interviews. The ethnographer himself purposively selects the girl students from different semester from the department of anthropology, Haldia Government College to better understand their cognitive categories regarding menstrual behaviour.

Techniques of Data Collection

The study uses semi-structured in-depth interviews as the major technique of data collection for the present study.

The Transcription, Categorization of Themes, and Interpretation of the Findings

After collecting the rich data set, it has been transcribed verbatim to get a deep insight of the issues concerned. The transcribed data helped to emerge specific themes that are contextual to the objectives of the research. The interpretation of the data has been done by using narrative data analysis method.

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

Ethnographies on menstrual health, hygiene and awareness among the adolescent and young girls across developing countries like India are in immense importance in anthropological literature and in contemporary anthropological practices. In this context the present study tried to incline us more deeply on the perception, knowledge and major challenges of menstrual behaviour of the college students in their institutional setting as well as their residential and personal living.

THE FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION OF THE FINDINGS

The findings of the present study are categorized by the following themes concerned-

i) Perception of Menstruation-The perception regarding menstruation varies in a

wider scale among the girl students under study. Arpita Jana, a 21 years old student from semester-VI opined that- *Menstruation is a kind of physical illness which is said to occur in women as a result of which, during menstruation, the eggs that are released from the vagina are contaminated by the blood. In which there are cycles of 5 days through which it is carried through that blood. If a girl comes in contact with a boy during that time, then she comes in contact after that time, then she can get pregnant. It would be wrong to say that it is a kind of physical illness. It is an activity that occurs in the body. It is normal like fever, burning, stomach pain, sometimes it is a bit too much and sometimes there is a pain in the stomach, sometimes there is a mood swing, and its symptoms are seen in every disease or illness....I have read this when I was at class ten at school.* On the contrast, Priyanka khatua, a student from Semester-IV has argued that- She went to the temple and realized that she had her period during her time there. Initially, she could not understand why she would only realize that she had her period once she got home. Her friend mentioned that girls get their period every month and it lasts for five days. She asked why that would happen and her friend replied that she did not know much about the matter and that it lasts for five days. She also mentioned that using sanitary pads is necessary during that time and it can cause discomfort and pain. The rest of the girls students perceive very less about this very common biological phenomenon and they were not been informed about menstruation and its cyclic pattern before menarche by their family members and by the other agencies like- friends,

neighbours, teachers and so on. They have also opined that if they evidenced the period of the other members of their family, their curiosity and questioned about the period had been diverted by other family members. They were rather more comfortable to talk about menstruation to their friends and classmates at the very early stage of period. But the friends only communicate to them when they themselves start conversation in this topic; otherwise there was a general inclination among the friends to be silent to this issue. As for an instance Rina Paul, a four semester students opined that- *When my period started I remain very scared and embarrassed because I had least knowledge about menstruation then..I have only explained my feeling to one of my close friend when she expressed his experience of period with me.*

ii) The Lived Restrictions during Menstrual Period

The lived experiences among the girl students under study during menstrual period vary individually. In this context, Arpita Jana replied- *...when this cycle comes up and even from my childhood, I was told to mix less with boys, even I had to make a clear distance by my grandma from my elder brother who is too close to me...apart my grandma also provided a clue to my elder brother to maintain a distance from me by saying that try to behave accordingly as your sister is getting elder with time.* Contrastingly, Sharmila Hazra, a student from Second Semester replied- *I faced too much rules as the prohibitions from my family members specially my mother, elder sister, and my sister-in-law..they have insisted me to follow such norms, like-avoiding to go outside at the first four days of the period, not to enter in any temple and to touch the images of God, not to attend any sacred performances and ceremonies like-marriage rituals, and 'bhaiphonta'...after the fourth day of the period I have had to take bath with shampoo in hare and by smearing turmeric and I have had to cut off my nails...they have also insisted me to avoid cremation ground during period...they explained that if I passes through the cremating ground, the negative supernatural power, like-'bhut' or the ghosts would have a control to me. I am still continuing to abide such rules unquestioned. Me as a researcher and at the same time being the 'girl' have to abide quite similar rules with Sharmila except I am allowed to*

perform guest welcome rituals in a marriage ceremony. Continuation with these facts Sneha Parai, a student from Semester-II experienced ritual very unique to us. According to her she was almost kept lock during her first menstruation time by her family members. She was strictly restricted to meet a boy even if it would her family member and she felt annoyed this time. The rest of the girl respondent shows similar experiences. They further adds some restrictions to be followed at the time of period imposed by their family members, such as- not to touch any tree, not to touch the container of pickle (as it would lose its quality), not to enter into kitchen, not to touch the food item considered as sacred or 'subha', like-fruits and other prepared food items and not to enter the place where the rice is kept in the room. A clear separation between the girl who are in the periodical cycle of menstruation and the rests considered as the sacred is maintained in every family settings of the students under study.

iii) The Diet at Menarche and during Menstruation Periods

The norm regarding diet during menarche and during menstrual periods varies a wide among the respondents under study. Rina paul replied in this context replied that- *I generally follow the vegetarian meal at the time of period and try to avoid rich junk and fast foods for better health and to avoid irritability all the day.* Contrastingly, Sneha Parai argued that when her first menstruation started there is a practice in her family to keep ashes under the food stuff to avoid negative energies of the earth. Tanushree Ruhidas Karikar, a student from Semester-VI opined that due to abnormal period on dates her mother offers special treatment to her like- a cup of water full of Jira and the juice of the grapes with seeds to normalize the time frame. The rest of the respondents generally follows a healthy diet and drinks a good amount of water to be fit and to discharge the negative ailments from the body. The respondents conforms that they generally avoid taking onions, salt and sour food stuffs at that time. Some students used to take bitter test foods to clear the flow of blood during menstruation.

iv) The Dress Pattern

In most of the cases the respondents seeks comfort by choosing proper dress very uniquely. Arpita Samanta, a student from Semester-IV replied

that she prefers to wear mainly black and other dark shades dress at the first few days of her period while appearing in college or other public spheres. Sneha Parai are opinion that she generally prefers to wear comfortable and light shades dressed in her residence as this colour and texture of the dress gives her a smooth feeling during the days of period. The rest of the respondents generally show similar expressions with that of Arpita and Sneha, but they added they try to avoid the skin-fit type of clothing and the white and light shaded dresses are avoided during the period. They avoid jeans and t-shirts and favour kurtis, and single piece garments during menstruation.

v) Practices of Hygiene during Menstruation

The respondents have an inclination regarding misconception about knowledge on menstruation hygiene. They generally maintain hygiene in their residence and store their pads in their own dumping boxes at home. Some of the respondents used cloths as pads at the very early of their menstrual period, but now they use pads, but a single student still uses cloths as pads due to financial condition. Those who use cloths generally wash it repeatedly to re use them and they dry the same in relatively moist and dark place to hide it from general public and are frequently infected by severe infections. The rest of the respondents use sanitary pads. The respondents generally admitted to the school near to their home and they used their home for changing of pads and other hygienic activities, but they rarely used the toilet of their school for hygienic concern. In college days they usually avoids college wash room as it lacks of enough water source, soap in wash room, dumping box, and vending machines. The respondents generally do not change their pads or napkins in college hours and have had the chances to be infected severely. As a result the respondents feel stomach cramps very often in college hours.

vi) The Crisis and Challenges regarding Menstruation

The respondents face severe and multiple challenges regarding menstrual behaviour. Almost all the respondents are facing to use contraceptive pills as medicine to avoid the flow of menstruation while any tour plans in their

family or peer groups. Some of the respondents who have personal room in their home generally avoid sharing her rooms during periods. Periods to them are non-communicable to others, so they tend to avoid inviting guests in their house. They generally seek gendered support from their family members to buy pads like they usually feel okay or comfortable with their mothers and sisters. The shopkeepers behave quite 'unnatural' to them while they have gone for buying pads. They symbolically behave in such a way that the menstrual cycle seemed to present as quite negative, the matter with silence, and above all the concern of stigma. Mood swing is another significant challenge to maintain balance in familial relationships. Sometimes they act wrongly with their family members that later made them depressed. Another challenge and at the same time a crisis they feel, when they are with the male members of the family, they cannot express their pain with the male members due to shy and adjust herself silently or turned to a sleep to minimize the pain.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATION

In concluding observation I would like to present that the respondents under study reflect different and unique dimensions of menstrual behaviour that claims the necessity of proper awareness camp must be initiated so that the girls students could realize the very obvious concept of menstruation from their school level. Not only that issues like-menstruation responsibilities and hygiene must be incorporated in the syllabus from school level and different seminars and academic interactions are needed in college level to enhance the knowledge and practice of the girl students. Multiple governmental and non- governmental drives and initiatives are to be taken in village and community level specially to incorporate the members from all sections for better awareness, removing stigmas and isolations, and above all to remove fear and anxiety and all sorts of negative view regarding the issues of menstruations before any policy making on the issues.

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THE APPENDIX

Interview Guide

Name of the Respondent:

Age:

Semester:

Department:

College:

1. The age at menarche-
2. The first feeling-
3. To whom she did convey the message first? What was her/his reaction? What she/he suggested to her to follow during the entire period?
4. Narratives of suggestion including the knowledge of hygiene, restrictions, advices, and wellbeing during the period by different agencies-like guardians, friends, kinsmen, and other agencies.
5. Feeling like (detailed description of the perception, like-curse, pain, public avoidance, or any negative emotional experiences or any positive responses)
6. The major restrictions during the period (detailed description) in family life and beyond including the silence, avoidance, taboo, and other contextual categories.
7. Source of knowledge regarding menstruation and menstrual behaviour-a) family member, kinsmen, books, internet, classmates, friends, teachers, and other relevant categories.
8. Medication during menstrual period (if any)
9. Details on tensions regarding irregular menstruation
10. Living in family setting during the period (detailed on interaction)
11. How would you manage your period days in college?
12. Major challenges to manage hygiene and other inconveniences in college during period.
13. Concept of cleanliness during the period.
14. Opinion about awareness regarding menstruation in common public.
15. What are the necessary measures must be taken by the college authority for convenience in emergency situation during the period.
16. What are the necessary measures must be taken by the Government in public toilet and other public spheres.