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Menstruation and personal hygiene practice among tribal female of Baria village, west Bengal: A case study

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Abstract

Introduction: 'Menstrual Hygiene Management' (M.H.M.) is an essential aspect for a woman's hygiene sector, but in India, 'Menstruation' is still a taboo. Because of social bindings, rarely proper cleanliness method is followed. This present study highlighted the issues and problems related to M.H.M. (Menstrual Hygiene Management) practices in Baria village of south 24 Pargana, West Bengal. This research also comprehended how the traditional myths, social taboos and misconceptions related to menstruation are affecting rural women health and well being more extensively.

Methodology: Seventy women of age group 18-45yr in Baria village were interviewed regarding their socio-demographic profile, knowledge, and practices on menstruation. A cross-sectional study was performed to conduct the research. A pre-designed and pre-tested questionnaire was made during the study after being tested on a pilot project basis on the targeted geographical area. Door to door questioner survey in the villages was done.

Result: Results highlight that there is a massive gap in the utilization of commercial sanitary pads/napkins and cloths among the differential age group of women. Poverty and education level play a significant role in the non-use of environment-friendly sanitary products and the disposal of the used product. This research opens an arena where problems associated with 'M.H.M.' is not associated with regional aspect but also in the global ground.

Keywords: Baria village, cleanliness, infection, menstruation hygiene management, social taboos, sanitary pads

Introductions

The term 'Menstruation' is the most compulsion part of female life. The beginning of menstruation is significant landmarks in the process of physical as well as mental growth of the journey from menarche to menopause of a female (Kamaljit *et al.*, 2012) ^[11]. In the physiological angle, menstruation means the periodic vaginal bleeding, with the shedding of the uterine mucosa. It is the significant signs of puberty (Majhi, 2016) ^[14]. Menstruation is the signal of possible fertility not only in the aspect of a bodily process but in the societal angle also. In medical perspective "Menstrual Hygiene Management" (M.H.M.) is an indivisible part of menstruation. From the beginning of human civilization, menstruation is associated with various taboos and norms; therefore, the misconception is a crucial part of menstrual practised. Research proved that about 88% of menstruating women in India could not acquire proper menstrual products and rely on unhygienic alternatives like pieces of cloths, ash, and sand on that crucial period. As a consequence, they are prone to the risk of reproductive diseases (<https://www.dasra.org/resource/improving-menstrual-health-and-hygiene>). There is an extensive lacuna in the knowledge towards menstruation among the women. There is a superficial level of awareness and misconception about menstruation among girls when they first experience it, till menopause (Ahuja *et al.* 1995; Chowdary 1998; Khanna 2005 and Singh 2006) ^[2, 5, 12, 16]. Social prohibitions, negative attitude of parents and society has blocked the access of women towards the right kind of information, especially in specific tribal communities because sometimes they are isolated from the other parts of the society and maintain a unique custom among their society. Further, their intense bondage with traditional beliefs, taboos, and misconceptions during menstruation has led to many gynaecological problems. However, the stringing fact is that the woman in most of the time unknown the factor ignores the fact (Bhatia *et al.*, 1995) ^[3]. Many national and international studies vividly reported that the period of menstruation is highly infection-prone (Mehra, 1995) ^[13].

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Repeated use of unclean cloth, improper drying of used cloth before its reuse results in harbouring of micro-organisms; as a result, the spread of vaginal infections are common issues among the menstruation women (Paul, 2007) [15]. Bondage with the traditional beliefs, taboos and misconceptions during menstruation has led to severe, much health-related issues. Due to lack of personal hygiene and unsafe sanitary conditions the menstrual girls facing many gynaecological problems (Bhatia *et al.* 1995) [3]. Infections due to lack of menstrual hygiene have been reported in many studies (Mehra 1995) [13].

Description of the study area- in brief

Basanti community development block is a part of the administrative division of Canning subdivision. It is under

South 24 Parganas district, West Bengal, India. This district is bounded by the latitudes 20°20' N and 22°06' N and longitudes 88°20' E and 88°60' E. It is situated 56 kilometres (35 mt) from Alipore, the district headquarters (Fig 1). The total area of Basanti CD Block is 404.21 square kilometres. Location code of Baria village (study area) is 335056 as per census data. This village is located in Basanti Tehsil in West Bengal. The area is 15km away from sub-district headquarter Sonakhali and 63.4km away from district headquarter Alipore. The total area of the village is 547.88 hectares. As per 2019 status, Baria village comes under Gosaba assembly & Jaynagar parliamentary constituency. Canning is the nearest town to Baria, which is approximately 20km away (District Statistical Handbook, South 24 Pargana, 2011).

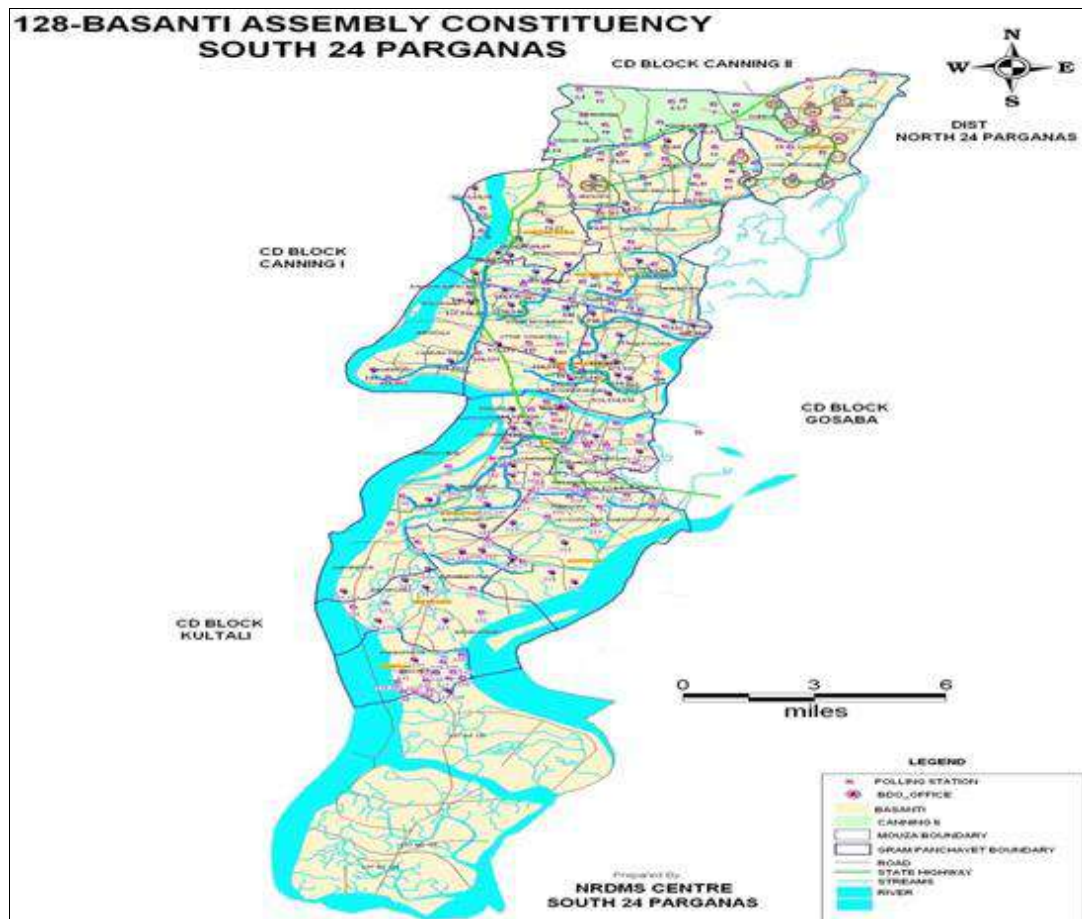


Fig 1: Map of Baria village (Source: Basanti C.D. Block office)

Topography

Baria village is comprised of the marine-riverine delta with an average elevation of 6 meters (20 ft). This area is a sedimentary depositional plain with a unique geological structure. The soil in this region is alkaline due to the excessive presence of sodium chloride, which makes this soil more fertile and scanty. The soil is also classified as Gangetic alluvial soil and Saline soil. The texture varies from stiff clay to clay loam in various places of the region (MSME-Development Institute Kolkata).

Climatic condition

A hot and humid climate classifies the village. It receives adequate rainfall from South-East monsoons which set in the latter half of June and withdraw by the mid of October. Pre-monsoon rains are received during March-April. The

average rainfall raised to 1800 mm. Due to high temperature as high as 40°C, May becomes the hottest month and in January the temperature as low as 10°C (District Statistical Handbook, South 24 Parganas, 2009).

Population & Literacy rate

The total population of Basanti CD Block is 336,717 (census: 2011). Among them, 4,881 people live in Baria village. There are about 998 houses in Baria village (2493: male, 2388: female). This village is comprised of 4881 Bhumij tribal population. Literacy rate in this village is 69.1%. The female literacy rate is as low as 58.2%, compared to the total number of literate population in Basanti CD Block 110,229 (56%) males and 85,137 (44%) females ("C.D. Block Wise Primary Census Abstract Data").

Menstrual Hygiene Management practice scenario among tribal women

The Government of India has implemented various scheme related to menstrual hygienic and sanitation practice in recent past years. This program mainly targeted is to improve public health from local to national level. An accessible sanitation facility is one of the essential components of women's overall health, along with her menstrual hygiene maintenance (<http://www.nrhmhp.gov.in/content/menstrual-hygiene-programme>, Retrieved Date: 25.9.2019). In the ground of tribal society, women believe in certain customs related to menstrual hygiene. With the decay, these customs turned into taboos and myth (<https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2015/08/11/431605131/attention-trump-some-cultures-treat-menstruation-with-respect>). These taboos and myths lead them towards an unhygienic menstrual life.

On the other hand, due to social segregation, many tribal groups may not able to access better menstrual products and better health facilities. Unsafe menstrual practice, along with poor personal hygiene, results in tribal women facing many gynaecological problems. Urinal tract infections due to lack of hygiene during menstruation is an underlying phenomenon which has been reported in many studies (<https://mwia.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Menstrual-Hygiene.pdf>). Cultural beliefs, taboos, lack of awareness, inadequate supportive infrastructure, and poor financial condition of the family are observed to be significant deterrents to improve menstrual hygiene-related issues (Ten, 2007) [9]. Among the tribes, menstruation is a topic for private discussion only. All menstrual issues and material are to be hidden from others, especially the male members of the family. If the males come to know about this, it is a cause of shame and embracement for the women. Women have to silently deal with menstruation and have to keep their menstrual material secretly and even have to dispose of these most mysteriously. All this indicates that among the selected tribal group (Bhumij) today also menstruation continues to be misty by many strict socio-cultural taboos and restrictions from the classic era. Therefore, tools and techniques of qualitative and qualitative research methodology are employed to undertake this study to

understand the menstrual hygiene related issued among them. This practice prone towards unhygienic lifestyle is also a significant issue for the tribal women measured.

Background Information on the considered Respondent group

Etymologically the term ‘Bhumij’ denotes one who is born “out of the soil”. Bhumij is the dominant Scheduled Tribe of Odisha and mainly found in the district of Mayurbhanj, but nowadays this large group of the tribe also settle down in different parts of the country mainly in West Bengal. According to their oral tradition, their original abode was in Tamulia of Bihar. They are believed to be a branch of the Munda tribe. Racially, they are of Proto-Australoid in origin. They are dolichocephalism and platyrrhine people with wavy hair and a dark complexion. Now, they have become multi-lingual and are conversant in local languages like Odia, Hindi, and Bengali also (Ota *et al.* [12], Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Research and Training Institute, 2014).

Methods and Methodology

A cross-sectional study was performed in Baria village. A pre-designed and pre-tested questionnaire was made during the study after being tested on a pilot project basis on the targeted geographical area. Door to door questioner survey in the villages was done. In terms of the socio-economic parameter, the population is almost homogeneous, so representative data are selected for the analysis purpose. Seventy women were selected for the study, whose age group varies from 14-47. The field was visited in the monsoonal post-period (December-January: 2019-2020). Purposive random sampling technique was considered, and women were interviewed regarding their knowledge, and practices on menstruation-related issues. Then the data was compiled and analyzed with the help of statistical techniques.

Result and Discussion

In this study, it is observed that during menstruation time, the women uses different types of materials based on their comfort level. Women are trying to cop up with this physical situation in their ways.

Table 1: Mainly shows that mainly the youth generation preferred to use sanitation pads during menstruation.

| Percentage of women taking part in the study | Using material during menstruation | Age Group | Education Qualification | Family Income |
|--|--------------------------------------|-----------|-------------------------|---------------|
| 63.18% | Cotton cloths | 38-47 | Up to class ix | < 5000/ |
| 20.40% | Market available Sanitary Pads | 14-30 | Up to class x | 5000-8000/ |
| 16.42% | Both cotton cloths and sanitary pads | 14-39 | From class viii-x | 5000-8000/ |

Table 1 mainly shows that mainly the youth generation preferred to use sanitation pads during menstruation. The demand for sanitation pads is high among the school going girls because they are linkage free. As mention above, 63.18% of women used traditional methods during menstruation, but among them, 48.95% of women preferred to use cloths. They are satisfied and comfortable whatever they are using. However, 14.23% of them are not comfortable with cloths because of their soggy feelings. They sometimes faced itchiness, awful smell and linkage problem with cloths, whenever they are going outside or doing heavy work. However, for buying a sanitary pad is a luxury because the average income of the family lies below

rs.5000/ per month. Women and school going girls mainly get information related to sanitary pads from peer groups and advertisements. Those who are using sanitary pads, they curtail their daily expenditure and invent the money for buying it. School going girls are sometimes collect sanitary pads from the school with the minimum price rs.3-rs.3.50/per pad, whereas the market price of a single sanitary pad varies from rs.8 to rs.10 depending on the brand. Still, girls are not satisfied with these sanitary pads which are given from the school. The size does not fulfil the requirement as well as the blood holding capacity lasting only up to 1 to 2 hrs. As mentioned above, 16.42% of women used both sanitary pads and cloths. Mainly in the

monsoon season because of the problem of drying the clothes, they prefer to use sanitary pads, but throughout the year they cannot afford sanitary pads due to its high price. According to the study, 66.7% of women use only water to clean their vagina because they believed that using soap may be created infection during this period (Fig. 2).

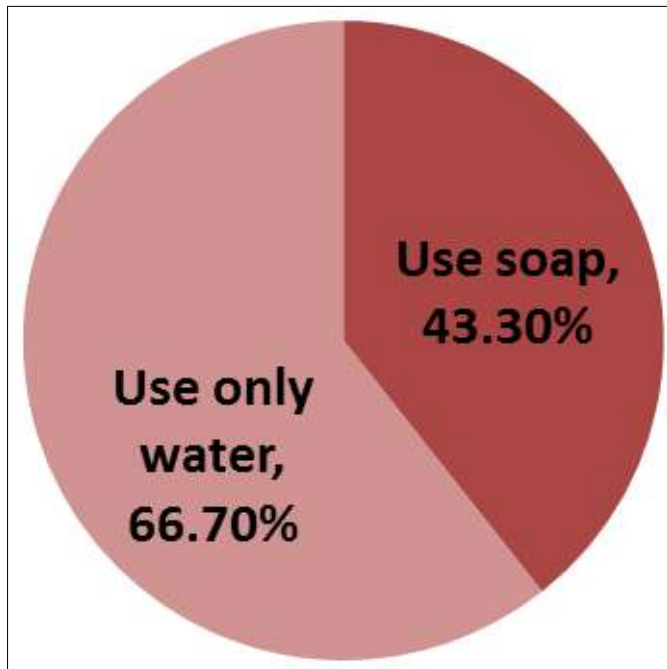


Fig 2: According to the study, 66.7% of women use only water to clean their vagina because they believed that using soap may be created infection during this period

There is no taboo related to bathing during the menstruation period. 99.8% of the women took a bath every day during menstruation. Only a negligible percentage of women (0.2%) bath after the bleeding had stopped. The below figure (Fig: 3) shows the drying process used by the village women after cleaning their cloths with detergent.

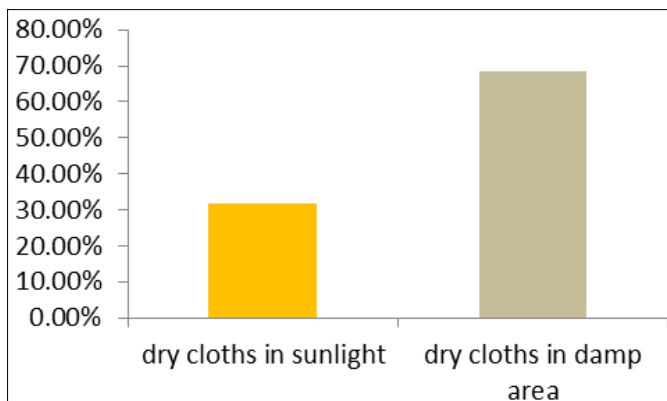


Fig 3: Shows the drying process used by the village women after cleaning their cloths with detergent

In this bar graph (Fig: 3) it is revealed that almost 68.4% of women dry their using menstrual cloths in a damp or dark area. So these clothes are not properly dry, and it is smelled awfully. Because of shame, they are refused to dry the clothes openly under sunlight. Among them, 23.5% think that these cloths may be used for the black magic purpose also, so they do not want to dry them in the open area.

Table 2: Show that almost 71% of women use a cloth for 1 to 2 times only, whereas 7.9% of women are using cloths 5 to 6 times

| Percentage of women participating in the survey | Frequency of reuse one cloth |
|---|------------------------------|
| 71.7% | 1-2 times |
| 20.4% | 3-4 times |
| 7.9% | 5-6 times |

The above Table: 2 show that almost 71% of women use a cloth for 1 to 2 times only, whereas 7.9% of women are using cloths 5 to 6 times. These figures indicate the fact that though cloths can be used several times without proper drying, these can create a bacterial infection in the urinal tract. On the other hand, those who used sanitary pads the changing time differ based on availability and buying capacity of the product and also depended on blood flow. The table (table: 3) shows the frequency of changing sanitary pads in a day by the women in the village.

Table 3: Shows the frequency of changing sanitary pads in a day by the women in the village

| Percentage of women participating in the survey | No. of pad changing time in a day. |
|---|------------------------------------|
| 41.8% | 2-3 time/ day |
| 33.5% | 3-4 times/day |
| 24.7% | 1 time/day |

Along with the various useable products, one of the most inseparable aspects with this whole concept is the disposable method of those menstrual wastes. The materials that are used by the Bhumij women during their menstrual period, it is essential to dispose of that product properly so that the environment would not be polluted. In this research, it is seen that women who are using cloths are mostly reused them for 2 to 3 times and buried them in the mud of the pond and case of sanitary pads, women also buried them in the same way.

There is a dilemma in this discussion, which plays a very circuital role in this research. Commercial sanitary pads are composed mainly artificial fragrances to neutralizers' order, chemical soap, laced with artificial colours, polyester, adhesives, polythene (P.E.T.), polypropylene and propylene glycol (P.E.G.) (http://consumpediamed.com/wp-content/uploads/link-impactes_EN.pdf), which are prone for hormone disruption, cancer, congenital disabilities, dryness, and infertility (<https://www.heydaycare.com/blog/5-health-risks-of-poor-menstrual-hygiene/>). These pads contain mainly non-biodegradable material, so it takes almost 500-800 years to compose in the soil (<https://fit.thequint.com/her-health/sanitary-waste-in-india>). With all the above problems associated with commercial sanitary pads, studied women mostly wanted to use sanitary pads because of its comfort and hygiene purpose. This study also found that a disparity of using sanitation pads and cloths only based on the economic level of the target family groups.

Those who used clothes mostly they are not able to dry those clothes, so bacterial growth is a ubiquitous feature on those wet cloths. In most of the cases, women are suffering from itching related problems (89.35%), but they do not disclose their discomfort to the doctors. One reason may be that there is no female gynaecologist in the nearest health centre in the village. Accessibility and affordability are vital issues that determine the use of hygienic practice.

Commercial pads are available in the village chemist shop. However, its disposal method is not properly guided by the health workers of the village, no proper disposal facilities are given from the governmental side, or improper instruction is written on the packet of the pads.

Significant of the study: The Government of India has launched the sanitation drive along with the menstrual hygiene to provide access to sanitation facilities to everyone to improve public health from the grass-root level. Women need to make use of those available sanitation facilities and menstrual product properly. The cultural taboos associated with menstrual cycles and their privacy during these days is not available. They use pieces of cloths to soak menstrual blood, instead of using other alternatives because of financial constraints, issues in procurement of fresh napkins, disposal of used napkins and lack of awareness of alternative materials. Each of the sanitary material requires to be used with caution and care, which requires awareness and training the tribal women for its use. Sanitary napkins are the only workable alternatives because the Government of India has launched a scheme to provide the same through ASHA workers at an affordable price. However, these are not available in every corner in the rural areas. Cultural taboos, beliefs and inhibitions require to be addressed along with sensitizing the women on alternative and affordable sanitary products to help improve menstrual hygiene and women's overall health.

Conclusion

Globalization of bio-friendly sanitary pad is the only way to overcome the disposal problems, and it will give a comfort level to the women. Commercial sanitary pads are sold mainly in the chemist's shop and in the departmental store. The urban population may have access to them from the outlets. However, in village areas, a chemist shop is not in an adjacent place, and these are not open for 24 hours. Women in the rural area feel introvert in most of the time to buy the sanitary pads openly because in the villages every person is known to another and people are considered to be relatives or neighbours. These show a sense of discomfort to buy and sell sanitary pads in rural sectors openly. If the health workers in panchayat level may supply the eco-friendly sanitary pads to the village women, it will be better to access.

The market price of each sanitary pad varies rs.6-11. If a woman can change a pad, every 3hrs to 4 hrs, every day they need six pads and the cost per day is rs.36-66. In four days, the average cost will be rs.144 to 264. This price for every month is a massive burden for the tribal women in this village. In the aspect of environment cloths is the better environmental choice. They are reusable, biodegradable. It requires relatively little water to clean. However, with the social restrictions and taboos, it is difficult to dry them properly. Without considering the fact, women are repeatedly using those wet unhygienic cloth regularly. In case of commercial disposable sanitary pads, they save them in tough time to protect unwanted odour. It holds a far better flow as compared to cloths or other materials. However, the sanitary pad prevents skin from breathing, so they can irritate the skin if used regularly. Sanitary pads disposal methods are accessible for women because it can be thrown away after use. With no knowledge of how to dispose of them, most women throw them in the garbage bin or a

vacant place which usually gets mixed up with dry, wet and hazardous waste. The plastic layer is used to make it stain-free, and the chemicals used in producing it get further transferred between soils, water and contaminated them, so affordable bio-degradable sanitary pad is required.

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