



E-ISSN: 2706-9117  
P-ISSN: 2706-9109  
[www.historyjournal.net](http://www.historyjournal.net)  
IJH 2023; 5(1): 123-126  
Received: 04-03-2023  
Accepted: 05-04-2023

**Lopamudra Ganguly**  
Research Scholar and  
Assistant Professor,  
Department of Geography,  
University of Calcutta &  
Vedanta College, Kolkata,  
West Bengal, India

**Lakshminarayan Satpati**  
Department UGC-HRDC,  
University of Calcutta, West  
Bengal, India

**Corresponding Author:**  
**Lopamudra Ganguly**  
Research Scholar and  
Assistant Professor,  
Department of Geography,  
University of Calcutta &  
Vedanta College, Kolkata,  
West Bengal, India

## Religion & Menstruation: An inseparable part of women's' life

**Lopamudra Ganguly and Lakshminarayan Satpati**

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.22271/27069109.2023.v5.i1b.204>

### Abstract

**Introduction:** Classical studies worldwide give a new dimension of how religious values motivated an individual's menstrual practice in the sociological framework and psychological understanding of social actions against social barriers in this issue. Religion argues that the law of women's social conduct and dominance is becoming a social taboo on menstruation issues. Religious structure and conviction decide a woman's path from menarche to menopause, depending on society's pattern.

**Methodology:** The discussion is entirely based on secondary sources available in esteem journals and web pages.

**Discussion:** Menstruation has been condemned by all religions, which has led to restrictions on socio-cultural activity during this period. The assumption is that menstrual blood is "dirty" that girls and women will bring "bad luck" to the counterpart of the society. The secrecy and shame associated with menstruation and assumptions about certain behaviours on menstruation activities are among the themes explored in the different regions worldwide.

**Conclusion:** Isolation, exclusion from religious practices, and sexual abstinence are the most commonly used tactics. Women are still prohibited from entering temples in today's religions. Both religions share the age-old belief in spiritual impurity, which does not seem to go away. Thus, menstruation is a taboo subject in today's culture.

**Keywords:** Culture, menstruation, society, religion, women

### Introduction

Menstrual hygiene is an observable global fact that influences menstrual management among menstrual women. Menstruation is a physiological phenomenon that is associated with the growth of human civilization. Menstrual Hygiene Management (M.H.M.) emerged from the 'Cultural Revolution' and societal progress. On the other part of the argument, the connection between religion and culture has been a multifaceted phenomenon with its multidimensional synonymous where e menstrual roles played a critical role in the social structure (Jaco, 2017) [12]. Sociologist Emile Durkheim opens up a new horizon in this discussion. He has constructed a very understandable relationship between religion and the well-known term "menstruation" as part of customs from the historical era. According to him, religious practice, human culture intersects within society with periodic blood flow (Durkheim and Ellis, 1963) [8].

Religion thought argued that the law of women's social conduct and dominance is becoming a social taboo on the segment of menstruation issue. Religious structure and conviction decide a woman's path from menarche to menopause, depending on society's pattern. Various text and evidential research stated that menstruation is a natural occurrence among females, witnessing bloodshed for 1-7 days per month from menarche (10 to 12 years of age) to menopause (45 to 50 years). It is an essential aspect of female physiology, pathology, and psychology, correlated with health and well-being (Omidvar and Begum, 2010) [22]. This phenomenon is not unique but is often referred to as a woman's problem. There is a prevalence of 'Silence' where embarrassments are associated with openly discussing any concerns. Various beliefs, customs, theories, stereotype thoughts, and taboos have led to the phenomenon's covert existence. They are so intricately entangled in a culture that they have harmed women's lives, thereby promoting gender inequity and exclusion. Studies have shown that cultural traditions, taboos and myths during menstruation have contributed to many health issues worldwide (Baridalyne and Reddaiah 2004) [3].

From the perspective of hygiene, menstruating women need more health-related support (Mahon and Fernandes, 2010)<sup>[19]</sup>. Hygiene-related practices during menstruation are of great importance to reproductive health as bad practices increase vulnerability to reproductive tract infections (Dasgupta and Sarkar, 2008)<sup>[7]</sup>. However, various studies revealed that "Menstruation" is more like a religious issue than a physiological phenomenon. Worship, spiritual behaviour, good faith and involvement in religious institutions are among the constituent elements of people's religious life within society. Religions guide the menstrual women's lives from the historical era to the present societal structure.

### Significance of the study

Religion plays a crucial role in promoting social cohesion. Menstruation is surrounded by societal taboos and customs in almost all religions. The menstrual cycle and women's psychological and behavioural changes are inextricably linked. From ancient mythology and historical or traditional rituals to present belief systems, this article illustrates how menstruation is seen in various religious groups in various parts of the world. The study's primary goal is to provide a comprehensive overview of menstruation and religious rituals in diverse parts of the world.

### Methodology

Various literary sources, including peer-reviewed publications, websites, and eBooks used as secondary sources for the study. The search for this topic is done methodically using Google Scholar, Pub Med, and other resources based on keywords (Culture, Menstruation, Society, Religion, and Women etc.) after that information are presented critically.

### World's Faith & Menstruation

Encyclopaedia of Britannica provides a brief description of religion, where religion means a practice associated with holy, sacred, absolute, spiritual, divine, or deserving of special reverence in humanity with Gods or spirits (Britannica, 2019)<sup>[5]</sup>. Worship, spiritual behaviour, good faith and involvement in religious institutions are among the constituent elements of people's religious life within society. From the world's viewpoint, different religions establish their memorable impression in the global view of the personal practice of 'Menstruation'.

### Zoroastrianism (10<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.)

This religion was founded by the Iranian prophet and religious reformer Zarathustra. This faith has both monotheistic and dualistic characteristics (Stausberg, 2008)<sup>[29]</sup>.

In Zoroastrianism, menstruating women are considered impure. Therefore, there are several restrictions placed on them. In addition, social activity is often regulated and restricted during this time (Skjaervo, 2006)<sup>[27]</sup>.

### Hinduism (15<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.)

Hinduism is the world's third-largest and oldest religion (after Christianity and Islam) known as the "Sanatan Dharma", or the eternal faith. Hindus embrace the traditional and often pluralistic essence (Sivananda, 1997)<sup>[26]</sup>.

According to traditional Hindu belief, a menstruating

woman has been regarded as a tainted woman. For this reason, women are segregated and untouchable during this particular time. After isolation, menstruating Hindu women ended their monthly impurity by ritually washing their hair on the fourth day and then their bodies on the fifth day (Leslie, 1992)<sup>[17]</sup>. At this time, they are instructed not to work, comb their hair, bathe or touch the water or the fire, and pray (Guterman *et al.*, 2007)<sup>[18]</sup>. Besides, the prohibitions on sexual touch, the sharing of space with their husbands during this time are strictly maintained (Nagarajan, 2007)<sup>[20]</sup>.

### Judaism (8<sup>th</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.)

Judaism is an ethnoreligious tradition, with about 15 million followers. The largest Jewish community resides in the United States and Israel. Together they make up about 75% of the world's overall Jewish population (Sherbok, 2007)<sup>[25]</sup>. In Judaism, "Niddah" is the word used to describe a woman during menstruation. During this time, society prevented her from taking individual-specific acts. After the 'Niddah' era, women have taken the 'Mikvah' (ritual bath) to their purity. However, this ritual is intended only for married women (Weisberg and Kern, 2009)<sup>[33]</sup>. Sexual activity and physical contact are strictly restricted during this time. Orthodox Judaism has prohibited women and men from touching or transferring things to one another at this point (Editor: Wasserfall, 1999)<sup>[31]</sup>.

### Buddhism (6<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.)

Buddhism is a path of spiritual devotion, contributing to interpreting truth's true nature (Harvey, 2013)<sup>[9]</sup>. Buddhism is divided into two major divisions, i.e. 'Theravada' and 'Mahayana'. Theravada Buddhism is predominantly practised in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. Mahayana Buddhism is primarily practised in northern Asia, China, Korea, Tibet and Japan (Keown, 2013)<sup>[14]</sup>.

From the Buddhist perspective, menstruation is a natural physical excretion that women go through every month, nothing more or less (Spafford, 2015)<sup>[28]</sup>. However, this direction is not followed nowadays because of Hinduism's impact on this religion. Stupas do not allow women to enter around during this period (Bhartiya, 2013)<sup>[4]</sup>.

### Jainism (8<sup>th</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.)

When the world's religious scenario transitioned from Buddhism to another direction, Jainism appeared to be a mature and living religion. However, it asserted hoary antiquity (Roy, 1984)<sup>[23]</sup>.

In many critical Jain texts, women's menstrual blood is considered impure. Like several other religions, Jainism often does not allow women to cook or attend temples while menstruating (Women in Jainism, 2020)<sup>[32]</sup>.

### Christianity (1<sup>st</sup> century A.D.)

Christianity is one of the prevalent and most common religions practised by Christ from the 1st century to the present (Hedrick, 2008)<sup>[10]</sup>. The main groups involved in this religion are the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Churches and the Protestant Churches (Humphries, 2006)<sup>[11]</sup>.

In most Catholics, sexual activity during menses is restricted. Orthodox Christians consider menstruation to be an unclean part of life (Cohen, 1991)<sup>[6]</sup>. Moving holy objects such as the Bible or religious icons is not allowed

for menstruating women. Russian Orthodox Christians consider menstrual women impure (Guterman *et al.*, 2007) [18].

### **Shintoism (3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. – 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.)**

Shinto is the national religion of Japan. This religion focuses mainly on faithfully carrying out rituals to connect present Japan and its ancient past (Rarick, 1994) [24].

In this ethnic religion, menstruating women are not only seen as impure in their cycle. They are permanently impure only because they are menstruating. However, even at their time, they are forbidden to enter temples (Kobayash, 2013) [15].

### **Islam (7<sup>th</sup> century A.D.)**

Islam is a Monotheistic-Abrahamic faith. This faith's leading teacher is to worship only one God (Arabic: Allah). This faith is the second-largest religion globally, with more than 1.8 billion adherents, most commonly known as Muslims (Nasr, 2002) [21].

In Islam, during menstrual times, women are excused from praying. Pilgrimages in Hajj are not allowed during the menses. Bath (Ghusl) is a necessary performance required to continue prayer after menstruation has been completed (Azeem, 1995) [2]. Coran forbids intercourse, and tawaf is not given in Hajj during a woman's menstrual time (Utheimeen, 1994) [30].

### **Sikhism (13<sup>th</sup> century A.D.)**

The founder of Sikhism, Saint Guru Nanak, believed in three fundamental tenets of this faith, i.e. Loyalty to God, real life, and service to humanity. In addition, values of truth, kindness, generosity, modesty, dignity and faith are taught in this religion (Alimardi, 2013) [1].

In Sikhism, menstruating women are permitted to visit Gurudwaras (the religious place of Sikhs). They may also give the prayer. This is because guru Nanak believed that contamination lies in the person's heart and mind and not in the celestial birth mechanism so that menstruating women are not considered impure (Jakobsh, 2006) [13].

### **Rastafarianism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century**

Rastafarianism, also known as Rastafarianism, is an Abraham religion in Jamaica during the 1930s. It is defined as a new religious and social movement. Religion scholars explain this religion as a social reformation (Waldstein, 2016) [34].

In this religion, menstruating women are restricted to cook food. They are often known to be impure (Lake, 1994) [16].

### **Discussion**

Menstruation is a subject that is avoided by society. Isolation, exclusion from religious activities, and sexual abstinence are the most consistently practised behaviours guided by most religions. Even in today's society, women are also barred from entering temples and separated during this period. It is particularly awkward to discuss it with men. In summary, menstruation is once part of a broader structure that regulated various bodily emissions; through time and rabbinic debate, menstruation prescriptions are modified to remain essential and measurable, in part because of future generations' status depending on their proper observance.

### **Conclusion**

Menstruation and faith have a complex relationship that can

be explored in several ways in the backdrop of menstrual practice. This study has contextualized menstrual practices within broader religious purity frameworks, addressing the dynamic intersection of menstruation and religion beyond a structure of prohibitions by engaging menstruation as a theoretical principle and physiological fact in the diverse contexts of various religions. Menstrual rituals have been examined to see how they can lead to a deeper understanding within a religious community. As a result, a scenario is how religious women can meaningfully handle menstruation in the pathway of religious restrictions. It has shown that menstruation can be conceptualized as a place where women's sexuality and, by extension, the religious community's boundaries and social hierarchies are regulated. According to the particular ideologies, menstruation creates a belief that women are the keepers of tradition and responsible for the family, culture, and religion with specific essential restrictions. On the other hand, menstruation and menstrual rituals may be tools for transformation and creativity in religious settings. However, societal changes are seen in all aspects except the restriction associated with the menstrual practice.

**Conflict of interest:** None

**Funding:** None

### **Reference:**

1. Alimardi M. God in Sikhism. *Religious Inquiries*. 2013;2(4):77-92.
2. Azeem SA. *Women in Islam versus Women in the Judaeo-Christian*, 1995.
3. Baridalyne N, Reddaiah VP. Menstruation: Knowledge, beliefs and practices of women in reproductive age group residing in an urban resettlement colony of Delhi. *Health and Population: Perspectives and Issues*. 2004;27(1):9-16.
4. Bhartiya A. Menstruation: Religion and Society. *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*. Singapore. 2013, 3(6).
5. Britannica T. Editors of Encyclopedia. Religion. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/religion> Accessed on: July 2020.
6. Cohen SJD. *Menstruates and the Sacred in Judaism and Christianity*. University of North Carolina Press. The United States, 1991.
7. Dasgupta A, Sarkar M. Menstrual hygiene: How hygienic is the adolescent girl? *Indian Journal of Community Medicine*. 2008;33(2):77-80.
8. Durkheim E, Ellis A. *Incest: The nature and origin of the taboo*. New York: L. Stuart. 1963, 1.
9. Harvey P. *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings History and Practices*. Cambridge University Press. U.K., Second Edition, 2013.
10. Hedrick C. *What is Christianity?* Piscataway, New Jersey, 2008.
11. Humphries M. *Early Christianity*. Routledge, London and New York, 2006.
12. Jaco B. *Religion and Culture: Revisiting a Close Relative*. ASIO Publishing. Cape Town. 2017, 73(1).
13. Jakobsh DR. Sikhism, Interfaith Dialogue, and Women: Transformation and Identity. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*. U.K. 2006, 21(2).

14. Keown D. *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University, 2013.
15. Kobayashi H. *The Miko and the Itako: The Role of Women in Contemporary Shinto Ritual*. Senior Capstone Projects. 2013, 160.
16. Lake O. *The Many Voices of Rastafarian Women: Sexual Subordination In The Midst Of Liberation*. New West Indian Guide, Netherland. 1994;68(3-4):235-257
17. Leslie J. *Roles and rituals for Hindu women*. Dehli: Motilal Banarsidass, 1992.
18. Guterman M, *et al*. *Menstrual Taboos among Major Religions*. *The Internet Journal of World Health and Societal Politics*. 2007, 5(2).
19. Mahon T, Fernandes M. *Menstrual hygiene in South Asia: A neglected issue for WASH (Water, sanitation and hygiene) programmers: A Water Aid report*. London: Water aid, 2010.
20. Nagarajan V. *Threshold Designs, Forehead Dots, and Menstruation Rituals: Exploring Time and Space in Tamil Kolams*. In *Women's Lives, Women's Rituals in the Hindu Tradition*, New York: Oxford University. 2007, 85-105.
21. Nasr SH. *Islam: Religion, History and Civilization*. HarperCollins Publishers, U.K, 2002.
22. Omidvar S, Begum K. *Factors influencing hygienic practices during menses among girls from south India- A cross-sectional study*. *Factors influencing hygienic practices, International Journal of Collaborative Research on Internal Medicine & Public Health*. 2010;2(12):412.
23. Roy AK. *A History of the Jains*. Gitanjali Publishing House. New Delhi, 1984.
24. Rarick CA. *The philosophical impact of Shintoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism on Japanese management practices*. *Int J Value-Based Manage*. 1994;7:219-226. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00897784>
25. Sherlock LC. *Faith Guides for Higher Education: A Guide to Judaism*. The Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies, U.K, 2007.
26. Sivananda S. *All about Hinduism*. A Divine Life Society Publication, Malaysia, 1997.
27. Skjaervo PS. *Introduction to Zoroastrianism*. Old Iranian Religion, Zoroastrianism. Iran, 2006.
28. Spafford Kara. *The Perception of Menstruation and Treatment of Menstrual Ailments among Tibetan Women in Mcleod Ganj, Himachal Pradesh, India*. *Public Health, Policy Advocacy, and Community*, 2015.
29. Stausberg M. *On the State and Prospects of the Study of Zoroastrianism*. *Numen*. 2008;55(5):561-600.
30. Uttheimeen SM. *Natural Blood of Women*. Daar Al-Bukhari, Egypt, Second Edition, 1994.
31. Wasserfall R (editor). *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law*. Brandeis University Press, Hanover and London, 1999.
32. *Women in Jainism*. Retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/jainism/beliefs/women.shtml> Accessed on: November 2020.
33. Weisberg Edith, Kern Ian. *Judaism and women's health*. *The journal of family planning and reproductive health care / Faculty of Family Planning & Reproductive Health Care, Royal College of Obstetricians & Gynaecologists*. 2009;35:53-55. 10.1783/147118909787072423.
34. Waldstein Anna. *Studying the Body in Rastafari Rituals: Spirituality, Embodiment and Ethnographic Knowledge*. *Journal for the Study of Religious Experience*. 2016;2(1):71-86. ISSN 2057-2301. (K.A.R. id:58669)