Article: *Tuloni*: Experiences and Negotiations around Womanhood in Assamese Society

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**Tuloni: Experiences and Negotiations around Womanhood in Assamese Society**

--- Maitrayee Patar

**Abstract**

Based on empirical field research, this paper critically looks at the different constructions around menstruation among women in Assam in terms of menstrual rituals, taboos and prescriptions, and lived experiences. It attempts to explore the negotiations that take place around menstrual taboos in the everyday experiences of the menstruating women and the complex role that individual agency plays in pushing the boundaries of these taboos. It looks into the traditional initiation rites of puberty that an Assamese girl has to go through at menarche, and tries to locate the structures of patriarchy that works through the menarche rituals. Women have been seen as central characters of this research and women’s own perspectives have been kept on the front while arriving at an understanding of their everyday negotiations with menstrual taboos and prescriptions.

**Key words:** Lived experience, Menstruation, Rituals, Sexuality, Taboos, Womanhood

**Introduction**

‘Maah baati loi suli duhuaa du o Raam joubonot disaahi bori hey, Kunuba purushor kopaal hol mukoli o Raam konya kaal hol aahi buli he.’

(We’ll wash your hair with grinded cereals for you have reached your youth now; The fortune of some man has smiled for you have reached your girlhood now)

(Assamese folk song on menarche)

Menstrual taboos can be understood as ‘those customs that are found in society that publicly restrict the behaviour of a woman at the time of menstruation, and apply throughout most of a woman’s life’ (Shah, 2012, p. 63). The mention of menstruation and its discussion continues to inspire a feeling of awe among the
discussants and listeners. In most societies and cultures, the topic of menstruation has been that of avoidance, and menstrual experience is considered to be something that needs to be carefully tucked away under the clothes of dignity, shame, fear and honour. It is uncomfortable, and what is uncomfortable must be made invisible, or must be at least transformed to something which is socially acceptable, something which falls into the safe realm of normativity.

Heteronormative social values ensure the construction of gender norms and subsequent social situations which are normatively comfortable. Consequently, in popular mass representations for instance, menstrual blood changes its color from an uncomfortable red to a convenient blue; black polythene bags or newspaper wraps cover up an already packaged menstrual hygiene product. The discomfort that exists in both public and private spheres alike further tempers the social environment, and creates a social situation where the discomfort seems natural, leading the women to feel a certain guilt about her own body which bleeds. The sense of guilt reinforces the discomfort and vice-versa. Discussing menstruation as an experience and the causes of a social discomfort around it then becomes a taboo; something which cannot be overtly talked about, something the existence of which everyone is aware of but which is socially invisible. This social invisibility of menstrual experience has been knit around society in such a way that there has been a social tendency to consciously believe that menstrual experience does not exist.

Menstruation seems to have found expression in liberal spaces such as art and literature which claim to have created spaces for subversion; however, those can hardly be read or perceived as alternate perspectives as majority of those expressions have either conformed to or reinforced the existing cultural notions about menstruation; the flavour has always been prepared by keeping in mind attributes such as fertility, importance of womanhood, feminine shame, guilt and restraints around menstruation; most have only added to the discomfort. Even in relatively liberal spaces such as academia itself, critical discourse on the experience of menstruation has for long been a topic of discomfort, a taboo, resulting in an inadequacy of insightful academic literature on the mundaneness of the whole experience; the everydayness that constantly gets constructed and reconstructed around it has also not been covered. ‘Everydayness’ creates room for negotiations; to talk about everydayness of the experience of menstruation amid a conscious silence of the normative social environment then itself becomes an act of subversion.
A great deal of complexity surrounds menstrual experience of the Assamese women. In terms of enactment, the taboos which influence her menstrual life are a curious mixture of religion and culture. These taboos are neither exclusively religious nor are they only cultural. However, what shapes the unique nature of the menstrual experience of the women, and what also became evident from the field visits during this research is that, in this context, the religious and the cultural cannot be looked at in isolation from each other. The religious embodiment of the menstrual taboos gets manifested in such ways that these taboos come across as the celebration of an Assamese culture itself. These embodiments definitely play a crucial role in the overall shaping of the personhood of the girl. Moreover, the performative nature of the embodiments leads to a constant construction and reinforcing of a feminine self, sexuality and identity. As Butler (1990) argues, the signs of a fixed, naturally sexed bodily identity are nothing more than the products of performativity. The performative practices of everyday life help one to create implicit knowledge about oneself as a gendered being (Hauser, 2012). *Tuloni biya*, the fictitious marriage ceremony carried out in an Assamese household as part of the puberty rituals of the female adolescent of the house is highly performative in nature. Thus, the celebration of the menarche ceremony of the Assamese girl is something that seals her identity as a gendered being. With a critical approach towards understanding the ceremony of tuloni, the paper would try to discuss the socio-religious processes that lead to cultural constructions and lived experiences around menstruation.

The ethno-cultural, linguistic and religious diversity of the state of Assam requires a researcher to specify his/her location of research, both in terms of physical as well as social geography. In the context of this research, the term ‘Assamese woman’ has been used to refer to the women who fall under the Assamese caste Hindu fold; the term has been used to also refer to the women who are members of an ethnic group in Assam, the Plains-Tiwas, that has been majorly influenced and assimilated into the greater Assamese identity, through the teachings of the 16th century religious and cultural reformer Srimanta Sankardev. How and why these women of the periphery came to adopt the Hindu patriarchal customs? What may have been the agency of women in the tribal way of life, and the possible residues of the same within the Hindu way of life? How do the anxieties of assimilation and alienation to and from a normative structure manifest in the lives of women? What are the nature of negotiations and bargains that women of different geographical and social locations exercise in terms of their caste, age and class? The paper attempts to address these not so physiological issues
pertaining to an experience that is universal to women and discuss the ways in which a physiological condition as menstruation morphs itself into religion and culture.

The Sacred and the Profane: Constructions and Fluidities

Making sense of social meanings and of the interactions of competing social definitions are the situations that make the study of social processes challenging. Sophie Laws (1990) has looked at the social treatment of menstruation and how practices of a culture produce messages about male superiority and compulsory heterosexuality to women. Laws argues that menstruation also becomes important as symbol of femaleness, and that how a society deals with menstruation can reveal a great deal about how that society views women. She challenges the universal menstrual taboo theory which proposes that menstrual blood is inherently dirty and that men are naturally repulsed by a physical function they do not share with women. Laws argues that there exists an immense variety of cultural practices related to menstruation and it is not useful to reduce the complexity and variety of rituals, practices and beliefs around menstruation across different cultures to generalised statements about taboos.

In Assamese society, menstrual blood is considered inherently dirty and the contact with it in any form is discouraged. The perception of menstrual dirt is not only physical but also is symbolic of a pollution that transcends the body of the menstruating woman. However, the complexities prevalent in the Assamese attitude towards menstruation further complicate its understanding as an experience of women. A coherent observation of the menstrual attitude among the Assamese thus tends to point towards a paradox, both in terms of performative practices and social experience of the women. The question that emerges is then on the nature of the taboo itself – on many levels, menstrual taboo in Assam comes across as a mixture of sacredness, profaneness and convenience. While the sacred and the profane can be understood in terms of formal representations, convenience works more in terms of the informal everyday mundaneness. The construction of the woman – her self, sexuality and personhood – has to be understood within the realm of these formal and informal representations.

According to Mircea Eliade, ‘the first possible definition of the sacred is that it is the opposite of the profane’, and ‘man becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane’.
Eliade’s (1957, p. 10-11). This view of Eliade was derived from the early Durkheinian view of the sacred as ‘things set apart and forbidden’ (Durkheim, 1995, p. 44). Durkheim had argued that ‘sacred things are the things protected by prohibitions, and profane things are those things to which prohibitions are applied and they must keep a distance from what are sacred’ (ibid, 38). This binary approach towards sacred and profane has been critiqued by sociologists of later times, since the evolution of social theory has proved that the idea of sacred and profane cannot be understood in terms of a dichotomy between the two; social realities are dynamic and complex, and boundaries of these realities are always fluid.

The mystery around menstruation makes it appear as a sacred one, and at the same time social construction of pollution makes it a profane affair. An attempt to transgress the boundaries thus has to be actions that are carried out with the knowledge that the self or the agency of the individual is itself a construct or an ensemble of all the social relations and discourses around one.

The ideas of sacredness, monstrosity, fear and mystery have to be understood in connection to each other and not in isolation; the sacred demands a certain acknowledgement of mystery, and the mysterious has connotations of monstrosity, or uncertain social attributes; this uncertain or monstrous character needs to be feared. What is feared requires that it is tabooed; it is thus possible that the cultural taboo on menstrual blood and the menstruating female body may have had been originally derived from a kind of fear of the monstrous unknown. Sacredness and taboo thus also go hand in hand. Analysis of cultural history of menstruation suggests that menstruation as a space of seclusion has always been a complex site of constructing culture. It is true that acknowledging this site requires an acknowledgement of the androcentrism that surrounds the understanding of culture; however, studies of societies like Yurok indicate how menstrual seclusion in fact may have played pivotal role in giving birth to culture itself (Buckley, 1982).

**Menstrual Taboo and the Fluid Feminine: The Case of Kamakhya**

In the context of Assam, the power of the menstruating Goddess Kamakhya is considered as something that is immensely potent. It is her ‘sacredness’ that creates a yearly taboo of three days on her believers whereby the space occupied by the Goddess becomes a tabooed space for the ‘visiting others’. However, this
is interesting and points towards a paradox, as for any other regular Assamese woman the taboo is reversed; it is her mobility that is restricted rather than the other members of household or the community. Thus, the menstrual taboo imposed on the woman primarily rests on the idea of her profaneness, whereas the menstrual taboo of Goddess Kamakhya essentially represents her sacredness, involving restriction not on the Goddess but on her believers. The fluidities and contradictions of social constructions around menstrual taboos become evident here.

Kamakhya is worshipped for her power to provide fertility; during menstruation this power is believed to be heightened, hence more sensitive, thus resulting in her seclusion from any profane distractions. Amlan Jyoti Sharma (53), a panda (local priest) of the Kamakhya temple said,

*She is more a mother than a Goddess. She holds the power to fertility. It is because of her that we exist. Throughout the year mother keeps her arms open for us. It is (in) these days that she rests. It is not wise to disturb (her). We can’t dare to touch (her) during this stage.*

(Interview taken during researcher’s visit to annual Ambubachi Mela, 06.08.2016)

A state of sacredness similar to that of Kamakhya is also extended to earth during this time. The Assamese community attributes this menstrual sacredness to Basumati (colloquial term for earth) as well, since Basumati and Kamakhya are believed to menstruate at the same time. For seven days, people restrain from any activity of digging, cutting or harvesting, or sitting directly on earthen floor. The earth which is the most mundane character in the everyday of an average Assamese suddenly gains the character of the sacred.

Mr. Sharma added,

*Cooked food should be avoided for these days. Both the mothers are at rest... She holds us all the time... so now (we) should not cause disturbance... no digging of soil or cutting of trees, forest... and only dry food and fruits are to be consumed.*

(Interview taken during researcher’s visit to Ambubachi Mela, 06.08.2016)
The above perception of the ritual rest of Basumati and Kamakhya, which is inherently pure and of high honour, can be seen in relation to the profane idea of rest around menstruation of a regular Assamese woman, along with the idea of pollution and shame that surrounds her everyday. The perception of rest is reversed in case of the latter. In case of Kamakhya, the ritual rest restricts the commoners from visiting the Goddess, wherein rest for a regular menstruating woman suggests a restriction on the latter. This restriction is highly spatial in nature, though it latently extends to a ritual restriction on the woman in terms of her physical movement to certain spaces which are considered ritually pure.

Contrasting values in representation of pollution and shame can also be seen in the portrayal of the menstruating Goddess and in the experience of the menstruating woman. Pollution around the menstrual period of Kamakhya involves everything else excluding the Goddess herself. This is implied from the fact that on the third day when the temple reopens, pieces of the red cloth soaked in her symbolic menstrual blood is distributed among the believers as holy possession and a carrier of power and luck, thus proving that menstrual pollution does not apply to the Goddess. It is the profane woman who is considered polluted when she is menstruating, and her pollution has to be done away with throughout the period of menstruation, which is essentially carried out through a spatial as well as ritual seclusion, forbidding all sorts of physical contact with the woman and her menstrual blood.

A subsequent shame follows. The shame is primarily derived from the physical source of menstruation, i.e. the vagina. The vagina is something which the woman is socialised to be extremely conscious of; she is encouraged to conceal its existence in all possible ways, until marriage. Marriage is the only social institution within which the woman is expected to exercise her sexuality without an attached sense of guilt or shame — a socially sanctioned way to put the vagina into use, suggesting more of a reproductive purpose than that of pleasure. Menstruation implies an active, physical involvement of the vagina, and a self-repeating, acknowledgement of its physical existence which cannot be controlled; hence, the shame. This is in direct contrast to the values that inspire the worship of Goddess Kamakhya, the physical representation of whose existence is her ‘sacred’ vagina.

Thus, in a way, both menstruating Kamakhya and the menstruating regular woman become a taboo for a specific period, but the former becomes a sacred
taboo restricting others’ mobility while the latter becomes a profane taboo, a pollutant, resulting in restriction of her own mobility; this becomes clear in their respective manifestations.

The ritual celebration of menarche of the Assamese girl also marks an embodiment of the social values of menstruation. Processes of gendered socialisation ensure the gradual construction of the ‘woman’ from birth itself, and subsequent internalisation of an assigned femininity works from pre-puberty. However, in the case of an Assamese girl, her menarche celebration or tuloni biya serves as a rite of passage that socially leads her to concrete ways of ‘becoming’ a woman.

The Tuloni Biya: Sealing ‘Womanhood’

The menarche in an Assamese household is an event. Bonti Kalita (name changed), a respondent from Karakushi, Sarthebari in Nalbari district, described:

In Assamese culture, when a girl is flowered it is an event, and the culture of celebrating this event has been here since time immemorial. We call it Tuloni Biya. It is also known as Shanti Biya in some parts of Assam. The puberty rituals of the girl begin from the moment the first blood is spotted. She is sent into seclusion for seven days and on the seventh day she is purified and her biya is celebrated. It is a feast and everybody eats, sings and dances. In earlier times, in any household with a girl child, marriage of the girl used to take place before reaching her puberty. This was called ‘aag biya’. After aag biya the girl was supposed to stay in her natal house, till she reached her puberty. On reaching puberty she was sent to her conjugal home after celebrating a second marriage ceremony called shanti biya or tuloni biya. Aag biya doesn’t happen anymore since people started getting educated about child marriage. Girls have started going to school since long back. Tuloni biya is still celebrated as a token marriage. You’ll find it all across Assam. I feel it is a way of staying connected to the culture of past. It is also a very happy occasion. We women have greater responsibilities towards our culture. I think it (tuloni biya) is a great way of telling our girls that they are now grown up. Moreover, parents have a fear that our girls might elope after
tuloni biya. To be able to marry off a girl properly is thing of great 
honour and respect. It is a big thing for the parents. But you never 
know about the future. So parents take the opportunity to celebrate 
beforehand through shanti biya... though in both of my daughters’ 
tuloni biya I had prayed that I get to celebrate their bor biya (real 
marriage). I am thankful to God as I could fulfill that wish. Both 
my girls are happily married.

(Bonti Kalita, 62, Sarthebari, in-depth interview, 02.08.2016)

When a girl attains puberty in a regular Assamese household, she is immediately 
sent to a seclusion of seven days. A makeshift bed is set up in a separate room. No 
one except the mother and a few close female relatives are allowed to enter this 
room during these seven days. Entry of any male member, even the father or male 
siblings is prohibited. The prohibition is not only in terms of physical meeting but 
also in terms of sound and light. No male voice should reach the girl and vice 
versa; she has to be kept away from sunlight. The girl has to go through two ritual 
baths in these seven days, the first bath on the fourth day of menarche and the 
second on the seventh day of menarche. The seventh day usually marks the end of 
the rites of passage, a series of puberty rituals that are carried on during the 
weeklong seclusion, and it culminates with a fictitious marriage ceremony of the 
girl. This marriage is called the tuloni biya.

Tuloni in Assamese means ‘to carry up’, and biya refers to ‘marriage’; thus tuloni 
biya can literally be translated to ‘a marriage which uplifts the girl’. The 
symbolism involved in this upliftment bears multiple connotations for the girl’s 
understanding of her own life thereafter, and the term has been interpreted in 
multiple layers (Devi, 2014). Apart from the ritual upliftment, tuloni definitely 
implies a kind of ‘social’ upliftment for the adolescent girl. It signifies her first 
ritual initiation into a sexual being, her socially elevated status as a fertile, 
menstruating, hence sexually eligible female. It is interesting because this 
initiation also directly marks the girl’s transition from a non-sexual being to 
someone who is made aware about her sexuality; but this awareness is more often 
of shame and subsequent guilt, and involves suppressing the sexuality she is 
becoming conscious of. Thus from the perspective of gender, the tuloni or 
social/ritual upliftment bears significance not because it elevates the girl’s social 
status to a sexual and fertile being, but because it generates social situations which 
initiates the girl into a status of restraint, thus conditioning her to behave in 
particular ways.
Menarche: Pressure of Attaining Puberty

For the Assamese, attaining puberty bears great significance, since it confirms that the girl is now a fertile female. The patriarchy in Assamese society is hegemonic and is almost always served with euphemism in everyday life of the members; perpetuating the patriarchy then becomes an implicit responsibility of the stakeholders, women being the most important carriers of the same. The implicit responsibility works as a form of guilt on the pre-pubescent girls. The confirmation of fertility thus comes as a relief to the girl herself. Reaching menarche becomes a passive pressure on the young girls, at multiple levels, and for multiple reasons. Togor (name changed), who had attained her menarche about a year ago, shared:

I was late. All my friends and female cousins of (same) age have had their tuloni. I was the sakhi in my friend’s biya before (my) tuloni. I also drank the water. They say you immediately have it (menarche) if you do so... yes, it is embarrassing, especially when you are publicly asked by the aunties when your biya (is) happening.
(In-depth Interview, 30.07.2016)

If one or more peers have had their tuloni biya, then the pressure further increases. Though the nature of this pressure appears passive, it actually casts tremendous influence on the young girl’s psyche; this pressure also continues to stay with her throughout her life as a woman. In a typical tuloni biya, the girls who are yet to receive their menarche are jokingly taunted by the elderly women and given ritual water from the biya. This is carried out as an attempt to make the girls menstruate at the earliest. The social importance bestowed upon the fertility of a female member becomes interesting here.

Puberty Rituals: The Stage of Liminality and Construction of the ‘Feminine’ Woman

Using a functionalist view to explain the role of ritual and religious processes on the individual, Arnold van Gennep (2004) wrote about rites of passage to describe the transition of individuals from one social status to another. He termed this phase of transition as liminal phase. Initiation rites have particularly well-marked liminal periods, where neophytes typically are removed, secluded, darken, hidden, without any social rank; in terms of social structures, neophytes are invisible.
They are neither here nor there, no longer a child, nor an adult. The ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed in a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualise social and cultural transitions (Turner, 1969).

The role of ritual practices in the creation of belonging is very significant (Douglas, 2002). Just like belief is a step beyond knowledge, belongingness is a step beyond mere membership. Human social interdependence requires that at least some of the memberships become solidified into something potent and secure- in other words, belonging. The best way to understand rituals’ epistemic and integrative functioning is to begin with its most universal and salient aspects—its practices. The effects of rituals that generate belongingness are mostly found among rituals accompanying life transitions. Initiation ceremonies ensure that one’s subjective sense of belonging change with objective membership, and that old bonds and identities are relaxed and new ones are forged; effortful nature of ritual practices is fundamental to the creation of belief and belonging. Ritual practices also construct the individual’s perception of self, apart from affecting one’s knowledge structure (ibid, 2002).

Assamese puberty rituals can be looked at as a rite of passage as it initiates the girl into the social group of fertile, sexually eligible women. However, a phenomenological perspective of the puberty rituals of the Assamese girl requires a critical analysis of the functionalist positivist understanding of these rituals as rites of passage as provided by Van Gennep (2004) and Victor Turner (1967). Similarly, while Douglas (2002) provides a functionalist understanding of ritual practices, he appears to ignore the latent and manifest control the individual experiences while carrying out the ritual practices.

As mentioned earlier, in most parts of the Assamese society the puberty rituals of an Assamese girl begin from the moment of her first bleeding. The girl informs the mother, or anyone of the elderly female relative, who immediately takes her to a corner of a room. The room has to be an isolated one with no sight of the sun and the moon, and men. She is then draped in a new/clean pair of hand-woven traditional Assamese dress called the mekhela saador; a makeshift bed is made on the floor in the corner of the room and she is made to sit on it. A few women, usually neighbours, gather in the room and collectively perform uruli, a ritual chant without words. After this the relatives approach the astrologer who then examines the time and stars under which the girl had attained menarche and prescribes appropriate rules and regulations to be followed by the girl for a period.
of time. These rules are called vidhana and may last from a period of seven days to that of three months, depending on the prescription by the astrologer. For the first three days, the girl is allowed to eat only fruits. On the fourth day, as per the time prescribed by the priest, she is given a ritual bath by the women, mostly neighbors and relatives, with grounded cereals and mustard oil. The old clothes are changed and new mekhela saador is draped. All other clothes used by the girl are also replaced by new ones. The girl is made to sit on the newly made bed along with a few other young girls, and all of them are fed fruits, cereals, milk, roasted grounded rice, etc. The womenfolk too are offered food, and blessings are sought before they leave. From the fourth day onwards, the girl is made to eat only fruits during the day, fast through the evening and eat siddha bhaat (boiled rice with sea salt and cow ghee) at night as prescribed by the priest. From the same day, the girl is given separate utensils to prepare her own food until her vidhana ends. The mother and other relatives see to it that the utensils and clothes used by the girl for the seven days of rituals are in good shape, preferably new. In most cases, the girl is either fed on banana leaves or on stone utensils; this is done with the hope that the girl develops a moral character as strong and firm as stone. In the early morning of the seventh day, the girl is given a ritual bath. The water used for the bath has to be brought by the womenfolk from a nearby water source. An elephant ears plant and a young banana tree are planted in the place of bath. The banana tree symbolises the girl’s husband and the smaller plant symbolises a son, and the girl bows and prays before both the plants after the ritual bath; the bowing and the prayer of the girl signify her seeking for a husband and a son and offering her youth for their good.

The enactment of the entire ceremony of tuloni biya is accompanied by a mixture of folk and ritual songs portraying the life journey of an adult, eligible woman. From extracting water from nearby water source to the ritual bathing and prayer to the dressing of the bride, these songs describe the cultural significance of tuloni biya in explicit details. These folk songs which are exclusively sung by womenfolk are popularly called biya naam (wedding songs).

**Representation of the ‘Assamese’ Woman in Biya Naam: Portrayal and Appropriation of Gender**

The universe of humans is hugely symbolic and not merely physical. The web of diverse human experience is usually knit through various symbols, which in turn addresses culture. Language usually plays a significant medium of this symbolic
universe. Language then also becomes a carrier of culture, and the use of language in imposing meaning to a particular experience becomes a way of asserting culture. Biya naam or wedding songs are folk songs sung by women throughout the ceremony of an Assamese marriage (Devi, 2014); tuloni biya is a symbolic wedding ceremony of the girl attaining puberty, and biya naam is thus an integral part of this fictitious yet significant arrangement of marriage.

The biya naam is a way of depicting the importance and significance of each ritual action through performativity. These ceremonial songs are instrumental in portraying the social significance of attaining puberty and henceforth, of being a woman. An analysis of the biya naam sung in tuloni biya presents one with a deeply rooted patriarchal structure of the Assamese society. However, biya naam also becomes an interesting and a very significant element in the understanding of the experience of menstruation, not because these songs depict the existing culture around menarche celebration, but because the content of these songs point towards a way in which women understand their own experience of menarche in particular and menstruation in general. A subtle yet distinct existence of subversion that is evident in these folk songs becomes important in analysing women’s perception of their own lives, in terms of how they see themselves in a societal structure that is otherwise deeply patriarchal in nature. This perception cannot be observed as a resistance to the existing structure, but has to be understood as a consciousness among the women, of the patriarchy at work.

A few examples of the various biya naam are given below:

On spotting the first menstrual blood:

O dear,
Your friends are now left behind
You reached this stage this young O dear,
you’re in deep trouble now
All these seven days our dear has been in trouble
But now she is out and we’re here for her
Our dear is so young and she has reached youth already
Wouldn’t it be wise to think of her marriage now?

On purification bath:

Our dear is so young and she has reached youth already
It wouldn’t be wise to keep her for long.
On femininity and fertility:

\[O\ \text{dear your fingers are like flowers}\]
\[And\ \text{your eyes, stars of heaven}\]
\[O\ \text{dear now that you are ready}\]
\[We\ \text{pray to God with all our heart}\]
\[That he graces you with a groom like lord Ram who will get for\]
\[our dear, delicious fruits\]
\[Who will get for our dear, sweets\]
\[O\ \text{lord who will get for our dear,}\]
\[Aniruddha Konwar from the heavenly city of Dwarka\]

Puberty and the rituals through which it gets manifested thus also directly impact the construction of sexuality of the Assamese girl. As described earlier, shame is a very necessary ingredient in the construction of the sexual woman. It is a kind of necessary shame as menstruation indicates fertility, but an overt display of this fertility becomes embarrassing. The complexity of this dual existence complicates the woman’s understanding of her own sexual self, leading mostly to passiveness. Baishya (2015) writes that in the larger established cultural knowledge of Assamese society, the social attitude towards sexuality is discriminating against women. He states that the sexuality of the Assamese woman is to be understood as a ‘chained sexuality’. Sexual freedom of men is taken as given, whereas that of the women is limited to marriage. Adultery by men is considered a natural flaw that can be ignored by social sanctions; adultery by a woman is however unacceptable. The woman is expected to suppress her sexuality and her sexual desires until she finds her husband, the right, suitable and able man.

The ‘ideal’ Assamese woman is a beautiful, educated, humble young woman who is honest and holds a firm moral character and who is also an expert in managing a home. The social processes that lead to the construction of this package of femininity and womanhood have to be seen in the light of women’s own understanding of this construction and in terms of interpersonal relations that get formed everyday throughout her life, the strategies and negotiations through which she exercises her individual agency, in family and in marriage, at home and at work, and how power operates in all of these relations and what role age plays in such operations. The construction of this femininity has to be understood also in terms of her perception of her own sexuality and the experience of sexuality and sexual decision-making in her everyday life. The stress on female sexuality
and reproduction are part of the requirements of patrilineal systems, and the particular way in which they are expressed in the Indian context have to do with the ideology and language of caste. The ideology of motherhood as developed in patrilineal systems subsumes the category of woman in that of a mother, and sublimes the erotic (Ganesh, 1990), basically purifying sexuality towards the utility of fertility, i.e., motherhood.

**Menstruation as a lived experience**

Drawing from Simone de Beauvoir’s famous argument ‘one is not born, but, rather becomes a woman’, Judith Butler writes about how gender must be understood as a modality of taking on or realising possibilities, or as a process of interpreting the body, thereby giving it a cultural form. For Butler, it is in this sense that to be a woman is to become a woman, and not merely a matter of adhering to a fixed ontological status in which one could be born a woman. Becoming a woman is rather an active process of appropriating, interpreting, and reinterpreting the received cultural possibilities (Butler, 1986).

In the Assamese context, becoming a woman has a lot to do with the socialisation that works together with gender norms to create the feminine woman. A feminist understanding of menstruation as an everyday social experience of women thus has to be seen in the light of the socialisation of the girl, and as the process which goes on to shape the perception of her own self as an adhering, normative, heterosexual, feminine woman. Norms, values and cultural beliefs transform into inner reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) of the women in ways which the specific feminine identity that gets constructed through internalisations seems natural to her. The identity that gets constructed by socialisation in early life gets repeated and reinforced in the further life experiences of the women. This constructed identity also impacts and gets impacted upon by the social, interpersonal and intimate relations that constitute the woman’s life. This identity, thus, is not a passive construct of socialisation; rather it has to be seen as an active contributor in the formation of further identities of the woman, while constantly interpreting and reinterpreting and reinforcing itself in the woman’s life.

If one analyses the experience of menstruation from a feminist perspective, it can be understood that the internalisation of feminine identity with respect to menstruation gets exercised in ways that women themselves become the agents of a patriarchal structure. Almost all the actors are women, and the cycle of
discrimination and violence expresses itself where these women themselves are the central characters, carrying out enactment of taboos and prescriptions in their own lives and in their intimate and social relationships. Strategic absence and convenient distancing of men from the social enactments of menstrual experience of women points towards an interesting realisation – the nature of installation of patriarchal structure in the women’s lives makes it appear that the patriarchy that gets perpetuated in the everyday experiences of women has women as the central perpetrators, instead of men. The lived experience of menstruation among the Assamese women comprises of many such instances of participation within this strategic installation of a patriarchal structure.

In a social environment that operates through normative heteronormativity, the centrality of marriage and childbearing in women’s sense of identity and personhood work in a way that is perceived as women’s destiny. Hindu texts and rituals glorify marriage and motherhood, and most of the times it is observed that this glorification gets translated into the woman’s own idea of her perception of the ‘ideal’ femininity. The women failing to bear children thus become a source of shame. This social importance given to fertility and a subsumed sexuality expressible only through marriage finds expressions in the experiences of menstruation of the Assamese women. For instance, Ms. Paahi, a respondent shared:

*I had irregular periods since my girlhood. I have always suffered from malnutrition. My menarche was very late. I remember everyone saying the pale flower had finally bloomed. After marriage I did not have a child for 4 years. My husband and in-laws were worried that I would not be able to bear any. I badly wanted to become a mother. Everyone was happily shocked when I gave birth to a son. But it was both happiness and relief for me.*

(In-depth interview, 15.07.2016)

Women’s sexuality is affected by the socialisation into female sex roles and the subordinate status attached to it (Miller & Fowlkes, 1980). Sexual autonomy can be said to be intrinsically related to social, economic and political autonomy. This autonomy has historically been readily available to men as a result of the unequal distribution of the available resources, both physical and social. The attempt here was to understand how sexuality is perceived and exercised in the everyday life of women with respect to their experience of menstruation. Looking through the lens
of the mundane, sexuality is treated as a very sensitive, intimate and covert relationship of the Assamese woman with herself. Most often than not, discussion around sexuality in a social group or setting is euphemised with words that imply romantic love. Sexuality is thus expressed through the symbolisms of everyday life. However, realisation of being a sexual individual first comes to the woman through her first encounter with menstruation. However, what one finds is that the realisation of sexuality has more to do with the social sexual than the biological sexual, and it also comes across as an important reality about the socialisation of the Assamese girl. The following excerpts from some of the interviews illustrate this point:

My friends had discussed now we could get married to boys. I remember I first got to know from them only that we all could get pregnant now. It was so scary. I was scared to be near boys. I wanted to tell my mother about this but did not know how to say. I now know it was stupid. But I obviously did not want to get pregnant then. I was very scared.  
(Nihali, 25, in-depth interview, 16.06.2016)

I had felt like a real bride. I was dressed like a bride. Everyone was saying that I had grown up and I should behave properly from now onwards. I remember everyone giving me blessings and praying that I get a good groom soon. They brought me a lot of gifts too. It was awkward. I remember having some strange feelings inside. There was shame. My relatives had asked me to mingle less with boys. I told them I had male friends in school and in tuition. They said it cannot be the same anymore. Maybe it was actually not the same. I myself had felt very different after coming out after seven days. Everybody knew that I had tuloni. My friends had later teased me. I have a lot of male friends now. But I was so ashamed then.  
(Rimli, 28, in-depth interview, 30.07.2016)

What is evident is that the first encounter of the women with the idea of sexuality vis-à-vis menstrual experience is layered with the feelings of fear, confusion, awkwardness and shame about one’s own body. It is also because ‘growing up’ of the woman is always seen primarily in relation to or as a pre-event of a greater event of her getting married to a man. The constant reminder of being ‘ready’ for
someone else, someone superior can be seen as creating pressure on the girl’s perception of her ‘self’, thus confusing her perception of her own sexuality. The first memory of the social encounter of the woman with her own sexuality being that of fear, shame and confusion of the newly achieved sexual status, thus negatively impacts her ability of sexual decision-making.

Another important factor that influences the menstrual experiences of Assamese women is age. The social position of the Assamese women has much to do with her social as well as her biological ageing. While biological ageing implies the natural ageing process of the woman with time, social ageing can be understood as the elevated social status of the woman, which again has to be seen in terms of her changing relations at home. Transition from being a maiden to being a wife, and that from being simply married to being a mother and so on leads to changes in the everyday menstrual experiences of the women. What has been observed is that the strictness of menstrual prescriptions and taboos get diluted on many occasions for the married woman as compared to the unmarried ones. This further loosens when one experiences motherhood. The relation of changing social status to the changing experiences of taboos speaks something interesting about the nature of individual agency of women in patriarchal structures – that agency of the woman in her everyday has to be understood in terms of her interpersonal and intimate relations – that the status of being married, the ability to bear children then make ways for elevated social positions for the women.

The factor that becomes extremely relevant when analysing the loosening of taboos with respect to ageing is sexuality. For the Assamese woman, a decreasing sexuality works as a factor of decreasing taboos. The pressure of menstrual taboos decreases with increasing age and decreasing sexuality of the women. These taboos finally come to an end with the woman attaining menopause. Menopause in this sense can be seen as a way of accessing power, as decreasing sexuality with age enables increasing power. Thus, in terms of menstrual experience, sexuality is inversely proportional to access to power. Increase in age also leads to change in performative practices of gender. There is a kind of social exposure that builds for the ageing/menopausal women which facilitates greater networking, enabling them to socialise more. Attached to it is a sense of permanent purity which derives from permanent infertility. This idea of permanent purity deriving from permanent infertility again points towards a complex nature of the perception of infertility among the Assamese society. What is infertile is pure, but it is only the infertility that is induced by ageing and menopause that qualifies for
a status of purity. Infertility at young age, i.e. inability to menstruate at all, puts the woman at the lowest step in the ladder of hierarchy of all social relations. Menopause provides women with a social identity that is pure and is devoid of any ‘dirt’. It also enables her to access spaces that had otherwise been inaccessible to her, thus enabling her to climb the social ladder and placing her higher in the hierarchy of the social relations that surrounds her everyday life.

**Conclusion**

The primary aim of this research was to look at menstruation as a lived experience, to document the narratives of how the ‘ideal’ feminine woman is constructed through a series of taboos and performative practices, and how the everyday experiences of menstruation contribute towards the construction of gender. Butler (1986) writes that to be a gender is to be in an ongoing cultural interpretation of the bodies, and hence, to be dynamically positioned within a field of cultural possibilities. Drawing from this understanding of gender, I have used empirical data and existing narratives around menstruation in Assam to analyse how the representations, contestations and contradictions in the construction of gender in turn shape the everyday experience of the women’s lives. Socialisation and internalisation of bodily and sexual identity influence everyday experiences of the menstruation and bodily changes in terms of age shape menstrual experiences of the women. However, by using individual agency in strategising and negotiating around taboos and prescriptions on menstruation that limit their mobility, interpersonal relations and social interactions, women constantly construct their everyday reality. The important aspect to remember in such an understanding of agency is that it is the mundaneness attached to the entire process that creates spaces for negotiations within the structure. The everyday experiences of menstruation contribute towards formations, contestations and reinforcement of a feminine identity; it can be seen that bargaining with these taboos and prescriptions by being within the heteronormative social order puts the women in a position of convenience rather than directly challenging normativity.
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