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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# WHAT TO FOLLOW “SCIENCE OR MYTHS”? A STUDY EXPLORING THE DEVELOPMENT OF SCIENTIFIC REASONING AMONG GIRLS THROUGH THEIR BELIEFS IN MENSTRUAL MYTHS

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### ABSTRACT

Science expects one to think in a rational and logical manner and studying science renders the ability to question happenings around us. But girls on the other hand are exposed to varied forms of menstrual myths and beliefs which are based on mythological stories and are in complete contradiction to scientific reasoning. Thus it becomes important to see whether they look at these menstrual myths related practices through a scientific lens or not. The paper explores the ability to look at menstrual beliefs through scientific lens among girls of Grade X in schools in New Delhi. The findings point out that girls of these schools have many misconceptions based on menstrual myths surrounded in their life and studying science has not been able to inculcate scientific reasoning among them.

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the recent incidents which took place in our country was of Sabrimala temple, wherein women were not allowed to enter the premises on the basis that they become impure while going through their menstrual cycle. As noted by Bhartiya (2013), a ritual of the temple (Ashtamangala Devaprashnam) was done by the priests just to make sure, if any of the women had dared to enter the sanctum sanctorum of the temple. It is believed that if the results of the ritual does not go well, it means someone has resisted the rule. It is well known that people’s life in Indian system is heavily based on customs and traditional practices that define the lifestyle ought to be followed by the people. The mythological stories are seen as the perfect examples to lead life that leave tremendous impact on every aspect of life. “Goddesses like *Sita*, *Sati* and *Savitri*, that fulfil this ideal, are important as role models for Hindu women” (Hedman, 2007, p. 8). The myths and beliefs emerged from such stories come with a condition that they are not meant to be questioned but to be followed blindly. The impression is such that it goes beyond scientific reasoning and logic. It involves both men and women but it cannot be denied that such practices are largely meant for women and girls.

Though, men are also somehow related to these but women are the ones who have the compulsion to take care and follow these without fail. In case they do not abide to such rituals, they are not considered a ‘good woman’. The definition of being a good girl, good daughter, and good wife is defined by predefined roles and behaviour as depicted in the age old stories. “Women, according to these *kathas* exist solely as wives, sisters, daughters or mothers without any individual identity of their own”, (Suri, 2017, p.11). It implies, that women and girls live their life in accordance with others who they belong to. Depending upon one’s culture, girls are exposed to varied forms of beliefs and myths through daily life practices channeled through their ancestors and other females in the family. They inherit and imbibe these in such a manner, that it seem natural to them and becomes an important part of their lives. Internalizing these dogmas as their innate behaviour and nature is so strong that their power to observe things in a rational way gets faint. In following these, their logical thinking gets lost somewhere, which they are not aware of. Even if some girls try to question, they are told by their elders to be quiet and follow these without any question. As a result, they get socialized in such a way, that they stop asking and gradually internalize such tenets as told by their significant adults.

### The context: Beliefs and Myths v/s Scientific Reasoning:

Despite the emphasis to develop scientific temper among the people, learning science does not necessarily bring any change in their outlook.

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It means it is not sure, if a person who studies science for a good period of time will develop a sense of rationality, logical reasoning or scientific way of looking at things. It can be justified from life of girls who study science in school at least up to grade X. The 'credit' for this unscientific mindset goes to the Indian system of tradition and culture that transmit various religious practices and beliefs among people which are not based on scientific logic and reasoning. Such practices pose many questions and contradict with common sense of a person. It cannot be denied that in case of girls these get very prominent as they internalize and consider these as natural process. Those who question are not counted in the category of a 'good girl' because girls should accept everything without questioning. One of the very crucial aspect of women's life is related to physiological process of menstruation which comes with lot of emotional, mental, physical and social suffering. Restrictions in life of women have varied forms, be it mobility, menstrual myths, different forms of fasts to be observed for husband and children. Every culture has developed some or the other way to keep women in control. In case of menstruating women, they "are not allowed to enter kitchen and temples, sleep in the day-time, bathe, wear flowers, have sex, touch other males or females, talk loudly, and touch pickle" (Bhartiya, 2013, p.524). In Hinduism, *tulsi* is considered to be a holy plant due to which menstruating girls are not allowed to touch it as it will also become impure. Some people also believe that menstruating women must not let even their shadow fall on the plant as it will die.

In light of such beliefs and myths, the present study tries to see girls' outlook towards menstrual beliefs, keeping in focus the scientific reasoning they have developed till grade X. Since, science teaches one to be rational and think in a logical manner, it does not seem that it goes well with girls' life. By exploring their perspective about such myths and practices, it has been tried to understand whether girls are able to look at such practices through scientific lens or not. The study thus analyzes girls' ability to look at certain practices which restrict them in a boundary and pose a question but not to be questioned, through a scientific lens.

### Objective

The objective of the study was to explore the development of scientific reasoning among girls of grade X through their perspective regarding certain socio-psychological practices such as menstrual myths and beliefs. It explores the knowledge, attitudes, and practices regarding menstruation and psychosocial issues attached to this physiological process.

### Method

**Setting and participants:** The study consists of four girls' schools in the Delhi region, two aided schools and two private schools. In total, 100 girls participated in the study who were of age 15-16 years. Girls of grade X were chosen in cognizance of the fact that during this period upbringing of a girl overpowers scientific reasoning, as she has to follow certain practices without questioning. Her curiosity to know and observe gets disoriented during these years of adolescence when she is more exposed to such issues and more prone to doubts and curiosity. This period of transition from girlhood to womanhood comes with a completely different experience in girls' life due to onset of menarche.

**Tools:** The questionnaire was administered to the respondents to collect the information concerning their feelings and experiences regarding myths and beliefs related to menstruation which are practiced even today. It included the prohibitions imposed during the days of their menses. Since it was an open ended questionnaire, girls have provided information related to their subjective experiences on their own.

### Data Analysis

Cutting across all the religions, menstrual myths and beliefs are pervasive and a common facet in women's lives. The variation and level of practices depend on myths and beliefs of each religion. In this section responses of girls regarding some of these myths are included. First issue is that girls are advised not to wash their hair during menstruation, as it can have bad impact on their health. Perspective of girls on this myth were explored through the following question. During menstruation, it is advised to girls not to wash their hair. What do you have to say about this? Does it have any impact on their health?

In totality it can be seen that nearly half of the girls (45%) Table (i) were of the view that it did not have any effect on health rather it's an orthodox thinking. But when it is seen among the types of school, girls from private schools are more who are of this view. Reason such as decrease in temperature of head and effecting the menstrual cycle leading to stomach pain and breast cancer, arthritis, asthma was also shared mostly by the girls of aided schools. The above data reveals that more than half of the girls believe in this myth who were mostly from government aided schools. Girls who did not believe in this myth belonged mostly to the private schools. Since such topics are discussed only by the mothers and other women in the neighborhood, it is likely that in case of these girls such misconceptions are forwarded by their mothers and other women in the family or surrounding, which bound them to have faith in such myths. Whatever is told to girls, they have to follow it blindly because questioning is not allowed in these cases. Similar results were also arrived by Gupta and Gupta (2001) who pointed out to such misconceptions related to menstruation. The authors explored that some adolescent girls had inaccurate perceptions regarding menarche and was thought as a beginning of a 'slow cancer' during their first experience since they were completely unaware of the process. The data obtained in the present research corroborated with the findings of Hermosa and Mejia (2015). The authors explored certain type of fears related to menstruation which persist among girls. One of the fear is related to stopping or slowing down of menstrual cycle due to use of cold water for any purpose. Using cold water in any form, be it drinking, bathing or washing hair must be avoided. The reason comes with the explanation that the blood flow which otherwise run smoothly will get affected and forms a clot which will lead to more painful periods the next time it will happen. Another fear which is installed in the minds of adolescent girls is about bad effect on their health after having sour, hot or cold food items during menstruation.

Moving to the second example of blind faith is that menstrual blood is considered impure and dirty. Views on this aspect were explored through the following question. Menstrual blood is considered as impure and dirty. What do you think?. Out of total sample, 72% girls thought that it is impure, waste and dirty blood removed through menstrual cycles. It was also believed that it can badly affect the health of the girls, if not removed properly from the body.

Only 27% girls shared that it is not dirty rather used to provide nourishment to the egg, if fertilization occurs, which is the actual process. Except girls from private school no. 1, majority of girls from the other three schools showed belief in this myth. The data above revealed that conception of menstrual blood as impure and dirty was very strong among girls, particularly girls from government aided schools. The girls who thought that menstrual blood is not impure were mostly from private schools especially private school No.1. These girls based their response on the explanation according to which the menstrual blood is used in providing the nourishment to the egg in case fertilization occur. Hence, it can be concluded that girls from private school no.1 were more who displayed disbelief in this myth. Such comments leave a long-term impact on their mindset which later become fixed notions and thus never get removed. According to Gupta and Gupta (2001), most of the adolescent girls have negative opinions and misconceptions regarding menstruation. The notion that menstrual blood is impure, polluting and a curse on every woman had been transmitted to them mostly by their mothers or other female relatives of the girls.

The third issue that surrounds girls' life is the change in their status from being 'pure' to 'impure' after attaining puberty. Before the onset of menarche, young girls are invited in *Navratri puja* and are worshipped as goddesses but after a particular age (menarche) they are not considered as suitable for that. To analyze this situation in girls' life, following question was asked:

Girls of small age are invited in *Navratri puja* and are worshipped as goddesses. But after a particular age they are not considered as suitable for that. How do you see this change?. Here also it can be seen that reason which are not based on any scientific reasoning are given by more than half of the girls i.e. 50% and 31% (Table (iii)). Such reasons are cited by girls of both types of schools wherein they believe that girls are not worshipped after a particular age because of menstruation as the blood which comes out in menstruation is impure and dirty, and girls too become impure. Only few of the girls reflected it as a conservative thinking and felt that, women should not be worshipped but must be given equal status.

According to Tables (ii) and (iii), most of the girls believed that menstrual blood is impure and dirty. It is also evident from the above results that most of the girls from private school no.1 considered young girls as goddesses who do not menstruate. Whereas most of the girls from government aided schools have connected this practice with the notion of impurity attached with menstrual blood. In both the aspects, the message conveyed is the same, i.e. menstrual blood is impure and dirty because of which adolescent girls who menstruate are not invited in *Navratri puja*. Similar results obtained from above data were also observed by Karlekar (1988). The author highlighted over emphasis of mythological tradition on the Hindu way of life. For example, at an early age girls are engaged in *Navratri* as goddesses. But at a later stage, when they start menstruating, suddenly their idea of self gets changed from being a goddess to an impure person. Dube (2001) focused on the changed status of girls after the onset of menarche. The author mentioned that practices within rituals, ceremonies, even the use of language are part of the process of socialization of Hindu girls. Before menarche, a girl is considered as a goddess but immediately after this physiological change she becomes impure. The data revealed that most of the girls had never given a thought to their changed status after menarche, which is questionable.

Such girls never questioned the myths related to their own body which affect their lives in many ways. On the other hand, very few girls were of the opinion that women are not to be worshipped but should be treated equally. A few girls who felt so indicated that societal and cultural practices are so powerful that even education is unable to counteract these age-old beliefs and myths in the society. It also interprets that the science education at school level has not been able to make any impact on the mindset of the girls as they have not developed this ability to question these myths which are imbibed in their lives. It questions the education system which has been so weak that it was unable to overpower such taboos prevalent in the society. Fourth instance is concerned with the practice of not allowing girls to touch pickles, sugar or several such things in the kitchen during menstruation. The question which was asked is as follows:

Girls are not allowed to touch pickles, sugar or several such things in the kitchen during menstruation. What reasons are given for this? What do you have to say about this?. In total it can be seen that more than half of the girls i.e. 36% and 16% (Table iv) opined that the pickle spoils as it can catch fungus due to bad smell which comes during menstruation. Along with that, girls also believed that pickle can be touched only by a pure person since girls become impure at that time. Among the schools, majority of girls from private schools showed disbelief in this practice. These girls did not believe in such practice as according to them it is superstition which restricts girls' individuality and disrespect her. The data obtained above shows that girls from private schools had raised an issue about girls' individuality and respect. Along with that it is worth to be noted that these girls showed disbelief in this practice and viewed it as an insult to girls and their dignity. It indicates that it is the ethos of the school which makes this difference between the mindset of girls. Some girls from government aided schools have also raised this as a matter of concern which might be because of their own awareness or exposure but it cannot be denied that girls from private schools were more able to express their concern regarding such issues.

A study by Sharma et al. (2013) explored the attitudes, knowledge and hygiene practices related to menstruation among the medical students in north India. The study also highlighted that one-third of the total girls were forced to practice restrictions during menses, out of which most of the girls had to follow more than three restrictions. In hostel, girls did not follow the restrictions religiously but they had to follow these practices at home. The study also provided the data pertaining to different types of restrictions imposed on girls during menstruation. According to the data, 93.2% girls could not enter their kitchen, 86.4% girls could not go to religious places, 84.7% girls could not attend religious ceremony, 83% girls could not make food, 72.8% were not allowed to touch and 52.5% girls could not consume sour food items. The points raised in the data obtained through the present research were also highlighted by Shanbhag et al. (2012), and Gupta and Gupta (2001) who talked about various restrictions which were imposed on girls. These include avoiding place of worship; be it house or any temple, touching *tulsi* plant, or any other food item which is hot or cold. Some specific food items which were not to be consumed and must be avoided include curd, ice creams, soft drinks, pickles etc. The reason for not allowing girls to go to temples as cited by women themselves and other stakeholders as well is that because girls during menstruation are impure and since temple is a sacred place where one should go with purity.

The repeated comments from others lead to fixation of such notions as a reality. As a result, girls start considering themselves as impure during menstruation. Therefore, they attain a new status of being an 'untouchable' especially during 'those days' of the month. It can be said that psycho-social issues related to menstruation can best be understood by analyzing the experience of adolescent girls, be it their knowledge, attitude or practicing myths. The results from other studies also found that menstruation is considered as a taboo among girls and it is strictly considered as a mother-daughter affair as per many other studies. It was surprising that even mothers are not open to discuss such issues with their daughters. Emotional feelings associated with menstruation are usually frustration, shock and anxiety.

The awareness about the fact that these practices are only myths and not based on rationality was significantly lower among the girls from aided schools. As compared with girls of private schools, girls from low socio-economic background displayed a restricted thinking when it comes to looking at these myths in a scientific manner. Though onset of menstruation comes with a lot of change in every girl's life resulting in many restrictions but the level and types of restriction may vary depending upon socio-economic background. It includes participating in religious practices such as *Navratri puja*, touching jars of pickles as it might get spoiled, avoiding hair wash and many more. This "ambiguity symbolized by menstruation" (Young, 2002, p.8) prevails even today as girls are advised not to visit religious place, or practice any religious activity during menstruation. Not conforming to such myths may lead to health problems as suggested by other women in the family and society as well. Many girls themselves do not want to take risk and some girls want to avoid conflicts so are bound to follow these under pressure.

## RESULTS

The overall results obtained from above data indicate that except few, most of the girls got influenced by menstruation related myths and practices and did not apply logical reasoning while practicing and believing in myths and taboos associated with menstruation. It seems that the rationality that one ought to develop after studying science for many years has not been acquired by the girls. The results showed that majority of the girls have not developed the ability to question socio-cultural practices that are not based on rational and logical reasoning and this is because science which has otherwise this capability to bring social change through its reasoning, and questioning power has not been dealt in the manner it ought to be. Some of the issues which were raised by the girls include their individuality and respect but it is limited to only few of them who belonged to private schools. Their ability to question things can be seen in their behaviour too as they can raise their voice against things which they seem wrong. While analyzing the textbooks of grade IX and X, Kaur (2015) mentioned that "the intersection of science with politics, religion or economics has not been touched upon. Their absence may indicate an assumption that societal contexts are irrelevant to the growth of scientific knowledge" (p.8). The reality is that there were many girls from both types of schools who regarded menstrual blood with impurity. Such girls had not developed the ability to look at things through the lens of logical reasoning and rational thinking which a girl studying science must display.

There is incomplete elimination of these practices because it's the mindset of the people which has not changed. It becomes a challenge for a girl to break this circle. Since girls who manage to get some education try to come out of these beliefs but it takes a lot of courage to fight against it. Kumar (2017) metaphorically drew the attention towards irony of girls' life in Indian society through the example of *Abhimanyu* in Mahabharata. To defeat *Kauravas* he entered the *chakravyuh* created by *Kauravas* despite knowing that he can enter the *chakravyuh* but had no idea as how to exit. Because of his half knowledge, he was not able to break the *chakravyuh* in the war against *Kauravas* and succumbed to death. Similarly girls who try to break the *chakravyuh* of customs and traditions created by the patriarchal society could not do so because of the strong hold of these over the mindset of people. Such girls ultimately lose within the hands of societal pressure as they get to face difficulties in every aspect of life. These results show that most of the girls considered in this research, despite studying science for a substantial period of time had not gained enough knowledge about the subject to be able to question these practices. In case some girls do, they are not counted as 'good girl'. A girl who lives in a society which puts strong emphasis on roles to be played by a girl i.e. of being a good girl, a daughter, a wife, a mother, somewhere forgets that along with all these she is 'a human being' and an 'individual'. Her journey from 'a girl' to 'womanhood' starts from childhood itself. Their lives aim to be a 'woman' gets manifested in various practices in the name of culture and tradition of which they are completely unaware. To them it all seem natural which cannot be questioned because such beliefs and myths get penetrated in their lives in such a way that they start believing these as a reality. Women are bound by societal expectations irrespective of their education and sometimes it becomes their own choice. This is so because of the internalization of these myths as their real nature which doesn't allow them to criticize or see these practices in a critical manner. It can best be understood in the words of J.S. Mill (1999) as he says that:

*"...was there ever any domination which did not appear natural to those who possessed it?"* (Mill, 1999, p.15). Cutting across caste, class and religion, this journey of a girl goes on throughout her life which is to control her own being or her individuality. Some girls showed unfavorable impression towards such myths and beliefs. These girls have raised question against the practices that control girls' individuality. It also points out that they were not convinced with the explanation on which such practices are based. Few of the girls are now becoming aware of the fact that these are age old practices which have managed to sustain in society without any logical reasoning. Some girls displayed deep fears related to menstruation that are infused in them which are not based on any scientific basis. Such a knowledge is passed down from generation to generation. These fears attained a status of being real and almost like dogmas which are to be followed, no matter how much education one has gained or whether one believes in it or not. There is a fear among the girls as what would happen if they will not restrict themselves or if they will not listen to their mothers. There is a feeling among them that something bad might happen, if they would not follow because this is what they have learnt from their mothers and elders. While discussing patriarchal practices, Bhasin (2003) also highlighted that girls are socialized in such a way that they internalize the attitudes which make them act according to others. And it is the 'others' who expect them to be good daughter, sister, wife and mother.

**Table (i). During menstruation, it is advised to girls not to wash their hair. What do you have to say about this?**

Responses	School				
	A.S 1 (%)	A.S 2 (%)	P.S 1 (%)	P.S 2 (%)	Total (%)
It can decrease the temperature of head and effect the cycle leading to stomach pain	70	44	12	30	39
It doesn't have any impact on health rather its orthodox thinking	20	22	63	70	45
It can lead to breast cancer, arthritis, asthma and other clinical symptoms in future.	10	33	0	0	11
It can impact our health due to scientific reason	0	0	25	0	5

**Table (ii): Menstrual blood is considered as impure and dirty. What do you think?**

Response	School				
	A.S 1 (%)	A.S 2 (%)	P.S 1 (%)	P.S 2 (%)	Total
It is impure, waste and dirty blood removed through this otherwise it can make us unhealthy	90	100	25	70	72
No, it is not dirty rather used to provide nourishment to the egg if fertilization occurs	10	0	75	30	27

**Table iii. Girls of small age are invited in Navratri puja and are worshipped as goddesses. But after a particular age they are not considered as suitable for that. How do you see this change?**

Response	School				
	A.S 1 (%)	A.S 2 (%)	P.S 1 (%)	P.S 2 (%)	Total
Yes, it is because young girls do not menstruate and are like goddesses	20	22	63	20	31
Girls are not worshipped after menstruation as it is impure and dirty blood and we become impure.	80	55	37	30	50
It's a conservative thinking as goddesses are all ladies who also menstruate but still are worshipped	0	22	0	30	14
It's the same girl who grows old. Women should not be worshipped but should be given equal status.	0	0	0	20	5

**Table (iv). Girls are not allowed to touch pickles, sugar or several such things in the kitchen during menstruation. What reasons are given for this? What do you have to say about this?**

Responses	School				
	A.S 1 (%)	A.S 2 (%)	P.S 1 (%)	P.S 2 (%)	Total
Pickle gets damaged as it can catch fungus due to bad smell during menstruation. It can be touched by only pure person as girls becomes impure at that time.	30	44	37	30	36
Such foods produce heat due to which periods come unlimited and may lead to problems.	40	33	0	0	16
Do not believe in this as it is superstition and restricts girl's individuality and disrespects her.	30	22	63	70	46

These others are their family, both before and after marriage. Kumar (2017) drew attention in the study 'Education and Girlhood' towards the socialization of girls through which they are moulded to fit in the predefined roles. The author refers to the term 'girlhood' as a creation of society which gets shaped through culture that imprints on the mind of the girl child from earliest stages of development itself. The learning that girls get from their family and kinship networks leave an impression over them that they are destined to be a woman who will be perfect, only when she would be able to handle her family before and after marriage. In a nutshell, the study highlighted girls' inability to observe menstrual based myths and beliefs in a scientific manner.

### Conclusion

It can be concluded that such practices are not eradicated to a large extent rather these are much in practice. Somewhere these girls were being captured in the cage of patriarchy which invades in all spheres of women's life to control over them, be it their behaviour, their mindset, their power to use logical reasoning and the list goes on. It is found that these myths and beliefs are so imbibed in life of Indian adolescent girls that it becomes difficult to come out of the barrier created by the age old customs and traditions. This is because these are carried over by the elders to the younger generations.

Here some of the girls seem in favour while others are against such practices depending on their exposure, upbringing and their own understanding. Ultimately one can say that there is doubt, if removal of adverse thoughts from the society is achieved completely in future. Continuous emphasis to follow such myths point towards the blind faith that society exhibits. It is a contradiction, that on one hand girls study science which is expected to develop scientific attitude among its learners and on the other hand they believe in practices which are in contradiction with scientific logic and reasoning. It shows that they have not developed the ability to question the illogical practices that surround their lives despite education and scientific advancement ultimately resulting in strong hold of these myths over the girls. It can be concluded that majority of girls believe and accept the dichotomy of purity and impurity associated with menstrual blood. It somewhere points out to the fact that girls come across such contradictions between the kind of socialization they are exposed to and the education they get through learning of science.

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