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The Menstrual Taboo and Modern Indian Identity

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THE MENSTRUAL TABOO AND MODERN INDIAN IDENTITY

A Capstone Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of History
and Degree Bachelor of Anthropology
With Honors College Distinction at
Western Kentucky University

By

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May 2017

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May 2017

I dedicate this thesis to my parents, Scott and Tami Norris, who have been unwavering in their support and faith in me throughout my education. Without them, this thesis would not have been possible.

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Abstract

Throughout the 20th century India underwent several political and cultural changes, including their independence from Britain in the 1940s and their declaration as a secularized nation. However, even secular India has been unable to remove itself from a religious practice that functions within it, the menstrual taboo. The Hindu menstrual taboo has survived for thousands of years, which begs the question: Are Hindu beliefs and values fundamentally Indian? The practice and history of Hinduism in India has informed the mistreatment and negative stigmas associated with women and menstruation. Restrictions are placed on menstruating women in India, including exclusion from religious spaces. The goal of this project will be to explore the different interpretations of not only the menstrual taboo but Hinduism in India and how it functions within the secular world to argue to what extent India is a secular nation. It will navigate through the 20th century, independence, secularization, and Hindu nationalism to show that Hindu practices and beliefs are in fact fundamentally Indian. I will use the attitudes towards and treatment of women, specifically the menstrual taboo, to show that the Hindu faith directly influenced what it meant to be Indian in the 20th century.

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Introduction

“The silence around menstruation is so culturally ingrained that despite living in a home without restrictions, around me, I saw innumerable examples that silenced me. Extended family firmly objected to girls visiting religious places during their period, for fear of hampering the ‘purity’ of the place. We were routinely told to wear black pants to ‘avoid embarrassment.’ There was nothing worse than the world knowing you bled!”¹ Revati Updahya blogs about her experience as a modern Indian woman and her opinions of the menstrual taboo. Updahya sees the continuation of the taboo as a social construct used to oppress women in the modern world and she believes that religion is being used to justify perpetuating it. She goes into detail about her own personal experience as well as the restrictions placed on menstruating women and the shocking statistics surrounding feminine hygiene in India.

Religions function within the societies in which they are practiced, influence the political and social aspects of those societies, and interact with the culture. Religions often develop strong positions regarding features of the society in which they exist and these positions can change the way people act and feel. In India the dominant religion-Hinduism- has, throughout its existence, affected every aspect of the daily lives of its followers. Hinduism has evolved from being the authoritative organization of India to being one of many moving parts of Indian society, not necessarily its ruling body. Throughout the 20th century India underwent several political and cultural changes, including their independence from Britain in the 1940s and their declaration as a secularized nation. Even secular India has been unable to remove itself from the menstrual

¹ Updahya, Revati. “Myths and Taboos Silence Menstruating Women in India”. The Establishment. May 2016.

taboo, a practice that emerged in connection with religion and continues to function within Indian culture. Today, whether it is carried out for religious practices or not and despite how it is understood, the taboo is, undoubtedly, a part of Indian culture. The Hindu menstrual taboo has survived for thousands of years, despite legal, political, and social changes. This begs the question: have certain aspects of the Hindu religion been highlighted throughout the course of change in India, specifically the 20th century, to support social structures regarding women? Have Hindu beliefs and values become fundamentally Indian? The practice and history of Hinduism in India have informed the mistreatment and negative attitudes towards women and menstruation. What is the explanation for the consistent practice of the menstrual taboo in India? The goal of this project will be to explore the different interpretations of not only the menstrual taboo but Hinduism in India and how it functions within the secular world to argue the previously stated questions. It will navigate through the 20th century, independence, and secularization to show that Hindu practices and beliefs have become fundamentally Indian. The focus of this navigation will be women, and I will use the attitudes towards and treatment of women, specifically the menstrual taboo, to show that the menstrual taboo demonstrates how religious interpretations have become intertwined with culture over time. I will use the Hindu nationalist movement to demonstrate the idea that India is a deeply Hindu nation because of interpretations of certain aspects of the Hindu faith being used to support Indian social practices.

India in the 20th Century

To begin this project's navigation through the argument that Hinduism was an unwavering influence on Indian identity in the 20th century, the process of independence and secularization of India must first be discussed. The Mughal Empire reigned in India from 1526

until it fell in 1857, when the British gained control over India.² The Constitution of India reflected the desire of the Indian people to break off from British rule; in 1947 India ultimately gained its independence from Britain and became its own nation. With roots in Hinduism, India's social structure differed greatly from that of the British. The Indian structure was based on the caste system-a system grounded in the idea of karma- and the British relied on a class structure which was founded solely on financial means and relation to the crown. In the Indian arrangement, a person may fall into a low class and the explanation would be that they had done something in a past life to deserve it. The British, however, never attempted to eliminate Hinduism in India. According to Paul Brass in his segment of The New Cambridge History of India, The Politics of India since Independence, "it was commonly argued by the British rulers of India that parliamentary democracy was unsuited to a society intensely divided into religious and other communal groupings, whose social structure also was imbued with an ideology of hierarchy rather than equality."³ The caste system remained in practice after independence was gained as a way to preserve the strict class structure that had been in place in India through the Hindu faith's influence on Indian organization from its beginning. The caste system divided the classes of people and kept members of the highest castes in positions of wealth, success, and power. Western societies often have class systems such as this that make distinctions between those who hold power and those who don't.

The emergence of a significant Muslim presence in India began when the Mughal Empire controlled India and that presence caused a strong Hindu nationalist movement. Although the British did not try to rid India of its two main religions, Islam and Hinduism, the Hindu

² BBC: Religions. Mughal Empire. 2009.

³ Brass, Paul R. "The Politics of India since Independence". The New Cambridge History of India. Pt. 1. Vol. 4. Cambridge University Press. 1994. Pg. 228.

nationalist movement was informed by a strong bond with the faith and an interpretation of it that supported their ideas of patriarchy and class. The movement itself led to a community-wide belief that the only true and rightful inhabitants of India were those who practiced Hinduism. Within that mindset, it is can easily be argued that Hindu beliefs and practices, in this case, the menstrual taboo, could be clung to in a sense of fear concerning a Muslim uprising as a way to protect the ideologies that were prevalent in the Hindu faith. These ideologies included class systems and patriarchy, the strict and severe treatment of women was referred to by Hindu reformers to be responses to the ‘Muslim threat’.⁴

Three political ideologies emerged during the late nineteenth century that informed and influenced the path of Indian politics concerning the Muslim-Hindu conflict and the role of religion; these ideologies remained in place throughout the 20th century as well. These ideologies included: Hindu nationalism, Muslim separatism, and secularism.⁵ Secularism was the official ideology of the Indian National Congress and is the official stance of India as an independent state. According to The Politics of India since Independence, before India gained its independence from the British all three ideologies had the same goal: to unite the country as one whole to fight for independence. The Hindu nationalists of course argued that the country should be united around all Hindu values and joined by ancient Vedic beliefs, philosophical principles, and rituals and that the country’s ideological basis should be a Hindu one.⁶ The Hindu nationalists believed that because Hindu values and beliefs predated the introduction of both the Muslim and British presences, that India was properly and rightfully a Hindu nation.⁷ History

⁴ Forbes, Geraldine. “Women in Modern India” in The New Cambridge History of India. Pt. 4. Vol. 2. Cambridge University Press. 1996. Pg. 11.

⁵ Brass, pg. 228

⁶ Brass, pg. 228

⁷ Brass, pg. 228

and common beliefs are what drove the Hindu nationalists to perceive India as inherently Hindu. Muslim separatists believed that Muslims should constitute a separate nation in South Asia and that the Hindus should constitute their own state. They advocated for this system because they believed it was the only way the two groups could live together and interact peacefully. If this plan wasn't followed, Muslim separatists believed that they would have to live completely separated from each other.⁸ The secular nationalists argued that the existence of the two previous arguments exhibited the necessity of removing religion from state affairs altogether. They believed that with its new independence India should become religiously neutral in its political sector.

The arguments over who should control India, Muslims or Hindus, led to numerous murders. These murders that occurred as a result of the Muslim-Hindu conflict included the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. Conflicts and killings made secularism the most logical option.⁹ Muslims and Hindus engaged in conflict throughout the 20th century in India as they argued over how to share India and arrange its politics in a way that would allow them to live together in an independent India that no longer had a state-sanctioned religion.

Even after the declaration of India as a secular nation,

“the state leadership has nevertheless felt compelled to make official distinctions between the Hindu population and the non-Hindu populations of the country by such measures as the passage of the Hindu Code Act, which established a uniform civil code for all “Hindus” in the country while leaving Muslims with their own system of Personal Law. It has also been alleged that many of the politicians of the country who proclaim their adherence to secularism as state ideology actually harbor Hindu communal sentiments.”¹⁰

⁸ Brass, pg. 228

⁹ Brass, pg. 229

¹⁰ Brass, Paul R. The Politics of India since Independence.

It can be inferred from reading the above excerpt that Hinduism still has a strong hold on the political sphere of India and that the degree to which the nation is a secular one could be called to question. This also concerns the degree to which Hinduism and Hindu nationalism influence the social structure and cultural practices.

The Hindus who participated in the nationalist movement believed that “...as the ‘majority’ population of the country, their beliefs and history ought to provide the ideological basis for an Indian state properly conceived as a Hindu state.”¹¹ This statement aligns with the argument that Hindu beliefs were promoted by nationalists as rightful Indian beliefs and that Hinduism informed 20th century Indian identity.

Hindus, like Gandhi, were active in the protests against the British in the early 20th century, due to a sense of Hindu and Indian nationalism. This Hindu nationalism made an appearance again in the latter half of the 20th century, in response to the growth of the Muslim population in India. Beginning in the 1960s, and continuing throughout the 1970s, and into the early 1980s, more Muslims were killed in India than any other group, including Hindus and police. In 1969, 558 Muslims were killed by communal violence, which was incredibly high compared to the 66 Hindus who were killed by violence that year.¹² Hindu organizations outnumbered Muslim organizations and worked to reestablish Hindu temples that were replaced by Muslim mosques. Throughout the late 20th century, the entire Hindu nationalist movement was led by men who resided in the higher castes. This demonstrates a belief that aligns with the Hindu faith and that the men who fell into a higher caste deserved to lead the nationalist movement because of their success in past lives. The Hindu nationalist movement showed an

¹¹ Brass, pg. 228

¹² Brass, pg. 240

intermingling of the Hindu faith with not only political issues in India, but also with the beliefs of the people in India, as well as how they identified.

What is a Menstrual Taboo? And what does it mean in India?

Based on the discussion in the previous section, it can be argued that part of the cause of the Hindu practice of restricting women being implemented in the daily lives of Indians was the emergence of the Hindu nationalist movement itself. The menstrual taboo as it exists in India originates from a Hindu belief in the impurity of menstrual blood and the impurity of women in general. However, taboos can emerge around any practice or topic, not exclusively menstruation; a taboo is a negative attitude towards or an unspoken aversion to something. A menstrual taboo is a social restriction or negative connotation attached to female menstruation and is not specific to one region or religious practice.

The Hindu menstrual taboo is one that has been carried out and perpetuated for religious purposes. This type of taboo can be found all over the world dating as far back as the ancient world. In the case of India, Hinduism specifically, menstruating women have been restricted so severely that they are prohibited from entering religious spaces, touching other people, touching or preparing food, entering their own home, or eating near men or non-menstruating women. Despite the development of India into a modern, secular state, Hinduism still recognizes the impurity of menstruation. The treatment of women in India, in regards to menstruation, demonstrates that Hinduism is and always has informed the societal norms of India. Menstrual taboos can be found all over the world in societies that did not interact to create them; the transition of the taboo found functioning within India from religious to secular occurred as a

result of human interpretations. How people interpret something informs how it functions in their society and what purpose it serves.

The menstrual taboo in India can be traced back to ancient Vedic times and a myth found within the ancient texts. The goddess Indra murdered Vritra, a serpent demon who controlled lightning and thunder. Indra broke down his barriers and walls to slay him. Vritra was the offspring god of Danu and Tvashtri. Tvashtri, Vritra's father, was also a god and was so overcome by guilt at the death of his son that he decided that part of the guilt that he felt would be taken on by a third party, women. As punishment for the murder of Vritra, women would suffer one-third of that guilt in the form of impurity, monthly menstruation.¹³ Women must be "purified" after menstruation before they are permitted to resume normal life. The taboo places restrictions on women, to prevent them from polluting things and people around them, especially religious spaces. For example, women and girls are not permitted to handle food, touch holy books, or offer prayers. The *Trikandamandana*, another of the sacred Vedic texts, which includes the story of Indra's murder of Vritra, explains that "one should not converse with a woman with stained garments, nor should one sit with her or eat her food when she has emitted the colour of brahmahatya."¹⁴ The brahmahatya is the killing of a brahmin, which is someone of the highest caste-in this case, Vritra.

According to the article, "Menstruation Related Myths in India: Strategies for Combating It", written by Suneela Garg and Tanu Anand, Indian women who participate in the taboo

¹³ Chawla, Janet. "Mythic Origins of Menstrual Taboo Rig Veda". Economic and Political Weekly. Vol. 29. No. 43, (Oct. 22, 1994). Pg. 2819.

¹⁴ Smith, Frederick M. *The Vedic Sacrifice in Transition: A Translation and Study of the Trikanamandana of Bhaskara Misra*. In Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women. Associated University Presses. 1991. Pg. 23.

believe that the female body emits a smell during menstruation that can turn food bad.¹⁵ The authors of this article go on to report statistics concerning the state of feminine hygiene as a result of the taboo. For example, “over 77% of menstruating girls and women in India use an old cloth, which is often reused. Further, 88% of women in India sometimes report to using ashes, newspapers, dried leaves, and husk sand to aid in the absorption of blood.”¹⁶

Menstrual blood is thought to be the result of a punishment from a deity, meaning that it pollutes the sacred and coming into contact with it can cause the pollution to taint people and objects. Some regions and families are stricter than others, but for the most part the Hindu menstrual taboo is so deeply imbedded in Indian culture and society that even non-religious and anti-taboo people still practice it. In some cases, young women afraid of being shunned or of offending their elders still participate in the restrictions despite their personal objection to the taboo. People receive the taboo differently, some agree with its continuation for religious purposes, while others are displeased with the practice altogether. Whether a person supports or opposes the taboo, Indian culture and society are so closely entwined with Hinduism that it can be argued that the practice is an Indian one despite its religious origins. Independent, secular, India is a Hindu state. The restrictions discussed previously can be seen in action through public notices, signs like the one pictured below are still posted outside of religious spaces all over India to exclude menstruating women and act as a deterrence to “protect” the sacredness and purity of the temple from being tainted.¹⁷

¹⁵ Garg, Suneela and Anand, Tanu. “Menstruation-Related Myths in India: Strategies for Combating It”. Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care. 2015. pg. 184-186.

¹⁶ Garg and Anand, pg. 3

¹⁷ Picture from google images

Rupa Jha from BBC Hindi published a video titled “100 Women 2014: the taboo of menstruating in India”¹⁸ in which she interviewed a 15-year-old young woman, named Margdarshi, living in India concerning her struggle to stay in school despite menstruation.



During her interview she tells her BBC interviewer that she considered dropping out of school when her menstrual cycle started for the first time because of her fear of people knowing she is menstruating and of people seeing blood on her clothing as a result of her lack of access to sufficient feminine hygiene products. She says “The biggest problem was managing it. It still is. I feel embarrassed, angry, and very dirty. I stopped going to school initially.”¹⁹ The video also shows women working in a small room recycling old clothes and rags, turning them into a kind of menstrual cloths. Throughout the entire video, which focuses on the taboo and the negative ways women are treated and regarded during menstruation, Hinduism is not mentioned at all. The lack of discussion of religion doesn’t show that the religion is uninvolved in the taboo. It reinforces the argument that the taboo, which has been discussed throughout this project, has its roots in Hinduism and has, because of that, influenced Indian identity. It demonstrates that the taboo goes beyond its foundation in Hinduism to affect women in their secular lives as a way to

¹⁸ Jha, Rupa. “100 Women 2014: the taboo of menstruating in India”. BBC Hindi. Oct. 27, 2014.

¹⁹ Margdarshi, “100 Women 2014: the taboo of menstruating in India”

perpetuate a patriarchal system. The existence of the taboo in ancient Hindu texts has been highlighted so much so in secular India that the religion doesn't even need to be brought up in conversations about the taboo. The women in the video did not discuss their religious affiliations because it wasn't necessarily relevant because they don't see a shadowy religious figure enforcing a taboo against them. To them it is an Indian norm and practice. In this example the taboo is not a religious practice, it is a social and political one. Young girls are taught to hide their make-shift menstrual cloths from men and to feel ashamed of their bodies and its normal functions. Overall the argument being made is that the menstrual taboo as it has been described here, functioning as a secular practice, is a result of the Hindu nationalist movement fighting for the Hindus' birthright to control over India. Hindu nationalists believed that they had a right, as Hindus, to remain the deciding majority of India because of the fundamentally Hindu nature of India.

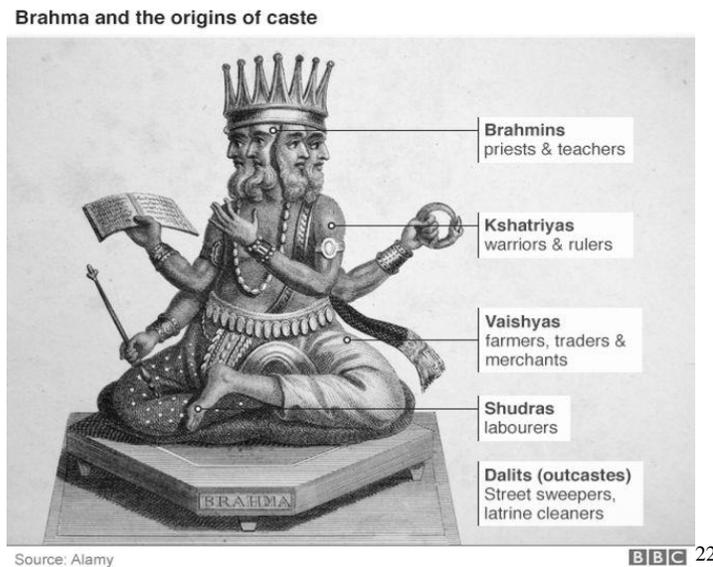
The Hindu Faith in India

In regards to the Hindu nationalist movement, Hinduism is not only a religious faith in India, which happens to carry practices such as the menstrual taboo; it also functions as a social system as well. The structure of Indian society has its roots in ancient India and originates from Hinduism; the caste system reflects the Hindu belief in karma. Karma is the belief that one's actions in a previous life have a direct impact on the position they hold in their present life. A caste system can also be found within the Hindu faith.²⁰ The Hindu caste system is separated into four groups: Brahamins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras, and lastly, the outcasts.²¹ The caste system even influenced the organization of the Hindu nationalist movement, as the nationalists

²⁰ Brockington, J.L. The Sacred Thread. Edinburgh University Press. 1981. Pg. 200

²¹ Fowler, Jeaneane. Hinduism Beliefs & Practices: Major Deities and Social Structures, Vol. 1. Sussex Academic Press. 2014. Pg. 34

fought to preserve their Hindu India, in the social, political, and religious realms. The continuation of the caste system that can be seen in India since its independence and secularization reflects the argument that Hinduism informs Indian identity and the two are intermingled. BBC India published an article discussing the Indian caste system and the way it functions. The Indian caste system is ranked in the manner displayed below.



The Vedas are the source of truth and knowledge and are held as sacred in the Hindu faith. Throughout the history of Hinduism, however, many Hindus haven't read these sacred texts. Members of the lowest caste and women were even prohibited from reading them. The Vedas reflect the supremacy of tradition. The Rigveda can be found within the Vedas; it is a collection of hymns used to worship the many gods and goddesses that were recognized by Hinduism.²³

Hindus place immense importance on purity and work to avoid pollution in all aspects of their lives. It is believed that anything that is removed from the human body is impure. For this

²² BBC India, "What is India's Caste System?" BBC India, Feb. 25, 2016.

²³ Brockington, The Sacred Thread, pg. 23

reason, menstruating women were labeled impure and a taboo emerged around them. Women are not the only people that are considered to be impure. The outcasts often fell into an association with the untouchable, much like women. The Hindu aversion to impurity demonstrates that Hinduism doesn't despise women, but that the abhorrence of impurity can and has been used to justify negative treatment of women, which supports the system of patriarchy. It can be argued that the Hindu aversion to impurity in any sense shows the use of specific aspects of the religion that are highlighted to support a social attitude towards women and give it religious backing. According to J.L. Brockington, these taboos and the fear of pollution are connected with the caste system; Brahmans, being the upper caste and the group from which ritual specialists are chosen, were kept separate from the lower caste to protect themselves from pollution, thus protecting their religion. These restrictions are still in practice and have even grown stricter over time. People who handled dead animals, cleaned latrines, and washermen, along with others, have all been considered "untouchable" by the Hindu caste system because of the danger they pose to religious purity.²⁴

Women in India

Following the argument and topic of Hindu impurity, it is also extended to women in India. According to Women in Modern India, written by Geraldine Forbes, the negative treatment of women originates from the Manusmitri. Women of higher caste in colonial India were married as children and, if their husbands died before they did, were expected to live an abstinent life and their impurity could never be removed. By the latter half of the 19th century, while still under British rule, people began to form groups that called for a reform in the treatment of women, focusing on female infanticide, child marriage, and prohibition of female

²⁴ Brockington, pg. 200

education.²⁵ During this time, the issue surrounding women's rights and treatment was referred to as the "woman question."²⁶ Women and mothers in India and Hinduism have been worshipped and praised and powerful goddesses play major parts in the Hindu faith. However, women endure strict restrictions like isolation and exclusion during menstruation. These same women also suffer abuses including rape- which they are blamed for-, and domestic violence as a result of the gender norms and any resistance to the restrictions. The discussion of women and their inferiority to men in India dates back as far as the RigVeda and the DharmaShastras. One of the most noticeable segments of the RigVeda was the Vasishtha²⁷, which included an entire section devoted to the laws and expectations regarding how to live a proper life. In regards to women, the Vasishtha provides instructions for menstruating women and refers to the subordinate status of women.²⁸ According to Manu, women were discouraged from seeking independence, could not own property, and their sexuality was considered extremely dangerous.²⁹ Even goddesses were feared because of their femininity and sexuality.³⁰ The patriarchal caste system in India has also had a strong hand in the control over women and their bodies; women of higher caste were controlled more strictly in an attempt to maintain the caste system and for the "legitimation and control of inheritance."³¹ The reality for women in India is that they didn't experience praise or superior treatment to men outside of motherhood; they were no less than property for their fathers or husbands. Daily life for a woman, as can be inferred from the Manusmriti, was full of

²⁵ Forbes, Geraldine. "Women in Modern India" in The New Cambridge History of India. Pt. 4. Vol. 2. Cambridge University Press. 1996. Pg. 19.

²⁶ Forbes, pg. 12

²⁷ Fowler, pg. 14

²⁸ Chawla, "Mythic Origins of Menstrual Taboo Rig Veda". pg. 2819

²⁹ Fowler, pg. 234

³⁰ Fowler, pg. 234

³¹ Fowler, pg.236

distrust and shame. It's fair to say that the shame and maltreatment of a shockingly high number of women did not die with the transition from the use of the Manusmriti as law in India.

The question is: why were the negative aspects of women in Hinduism highlighted throughout the 20th century while the positive ones seem to have been overshadowed or overlooked? In other words, when did oppression surpass praise? Women were in some instances held in high regard in the original Hindu texts and ancient practice. However, that high regard seems to have been left out of the Hindu nationalist movement, the movement that was concerned with Hindu pride and rightful control of India. There has always been a sense of misogyny and female inferiority present in Hinduism, as has been demonstrated throughout this argument. Contact with the British and with Muslims, as well as the uprising of Hindu pride, has left women out of the conversation almost completely.

Western nations, in this case especially, Britain, during the 19th century were incredibly patriarchal and in a sense misogynistic. Their political sphere didn't include many women who had high-ranking positions and a voice; the women's suffrage movement in Britain didn't begin until the 1860s. Interacting with Muslims and the British for hundreds of years not only informed the formation of the Hindu nationalist movement, but also the factors of the Hindu faith that were included in the nationalists' understanding of what it meant to be rightfully Indian. The Hindu treatment of women can be traced back to the smritis, meaning the time of law codes such as the Manusmriti, but reformers and nationalists claimed that "child marriage, prohibitions on widow marriage, seclusion, and restrictions of female education" were responses to the Muslim threat to women's safety.³²

³² Forbes, pg. 16

In terms of modern Indian women and their experience in India and living in a Hindu values-based culture, the negativity that was highlighted in the 20th century is still highlighted today. According to Anshu Gupta, a woman interviewed in the BBC video which has been previously discussed, the menstrual taboo and the negative connotation associated with menstruation has been designated a women's issue in India. Gupta believes that women are made to feel isolated and ashamed of their bodies and that the menstrual taboo is, in reality, a human issue. As will be discussed in the following section, Gupta is making attempts to remedy what she believes is an injustice being done to women in India.

Interpretations of the Taboo

With any topic that has religious roots, like the one being discussed here, opinions, beliefs, and emotions arise and become part of the conversation. The Hindu menstrual taboo not only sparks conversation in India, but also around the world. The first groups that will be discussed here will be people in India, who experience this taboo as a part of daily lives and as a part of their religions and traditions. Three people introduced here are people who strongly oppose the taboo and every aspect of it, the restrictions, the attitudes, the threats to health, and the shame that is attached to women. With the global stage of feminism being what it is today, more people are opposing the taboo than supporting it.

Anshu Gupta, briefly introduced in the previous section, heads a non-profit organization called Goonj; the group is dedicated to ending silence around menstruation and the myths that are associated with it. Gupta told BBC, "It's not a women issue. It's a human issue but we have just isolated it. Some of us need to come out of this culture of shame and silence. We need to

break it."³³ Gupta's organization is also working to manufacture affordable sanitary products from recycled cloths. Goonj is operating in 21 out of 30 states in India.

There are also other men who would agree with Anshu Gupta and who oppose the continuation of the taboo as well. Arunachalam Muruganantham is an Indian man who felt a call to action when he saw his wife attempting to hide the old, used rag she was using during her menstrual cycle. Muruganantham tells the audience in his Ted Talk that he would not even have used the rag to clean his two-wheeler; when he asked his wife why she was using such an unhygienic method of protection she told him that she couldn't use sanitary napkins because their family would have to cut their milk budget if she did.³⁴ Muruganantham went to go buy his wife sanitary napkins and the clerk at the store wrapped them in newspaper to hide them. Because of all of this, Muruganantham began conducting research into feminine hygiene in India and saw it as unacceptable that only 2% of women in India are using and can afford to use sanitary napkins. Since his wife and sisters, as well as college students, refused to help him complete his research and try out his product-sanitary napkins, Muruganantham wore one himself for five days and used animal blood to test it.

Thus, the sanitary napkin machine was created. Muruganantham created it to make sanitary napkins out of raw organic materials and told his audience that for the time being he will only allow it to be used in rural regions by women who otherwise wouldn't have access to hygienic menstrual products. Here is a modern Indian man who finds it deplorable that in the 21st century Indian women have to use old, unsanitary rags as protection, have almost no access to feminine hygiene products, and are embarrassed by menstruation. Muruganantham has been

³³ Anshu Gupta, "100 Women 2014: the taboo of menstruating in India". BBC Hindi. Oct. 27, 2014.

³⁴ Arunachalam Muruganantham: How I Started a Sanitary Napkin Revolution. TED. May 2012.

called “napkin man” in an article published by The Hindu.³⁵ Despite the menstrual taboo, Muruganantham stood up in front of an entire world audience during his TED talk to explain how he plans to help women in rural India fight the negativity associated with the menstrual experience.

Revati Upadhyaya, the young Indian woman introduced in the beginning of this paper, now writes a blog about her life, specifically in relation to growing up in India. In her post, “Myths and Taboos Silence Menstruating Women in India”, Upadhyaya discusses her experience of shame, embarrassment, and restriction as a result of the menstrual taboo. Upadhyaya focuses mainly on the health risks for women as a result of the taboo. Being born into an educated liberal family, she had access to information and feminine care, however, Upadhyaya tells her readers that 80% of women in India have no access to feminine hygiene products and that the strict restrictions on women during menstruation cross all socioeconomic classes and include severe exclusion and segregation. Women are expected to eat in isolation or even sit in separate corners of the houses.

Upadhyaya’s opinion on the taboo is that menstruating women are made to feel ashamed in India; one example she provides is the widely popular myth that if a menstruating woman touches a pickle jar, the pickles will certainly go bad. Even Upadhyaya’s own extended family objected to girls and women visiting religious spaces during their period, “for fear of hampering the purity of the place”.³⁶ Upadhyaya goes on to provide more statistics including the fact that 70% of all reproductive diseases in India are caused by negligent menstrual hygiene and that 23% of girls between 12-18 drop out of school when they begin menstruation because of this lack of

³⁵ R. Ramabhadran Pillai, “‘Napkin Man’ on a mission to empower women”, *The Hindu*. Dec. 9, 2014.

³⁶ Revati Upadhyaya, “Myths and Taboos Silence Menstruating Women in India”, May 28, 2016, <http://www.theestablishment.co/2016/05/28/oppression-examined-menstruation-in-india/>

access to safe and sanitary protection. Cloth pads or cloth rags are often used as protection, however, even wood shavings, dried leaves, hay, or plastic have been used by women in some cases. Using the words “period” or “menstruating” is very uncommon and makes people uncomfortable. Often, words like “unwell” or saying “I’m down” are used to describe menstruation. Upadhyia provides her reader with an anecdote about a friend she had in college who attempted to invite her roommates to accompany her to Madurai, a famous temple town in South India, while she was menstruating; her friends refused to go with her for fear of the wrath of the goddess falling upon them. In her discussion of the use of the taboo to reinforce cultural practices and gender norms she provides evidence that shows that in modern times more and more people are questioning the taboo’s religious purposes.

The Supreme Court in India has recently begun inspecting a ban on women between ages 10-55 entering the Sabarimala Temple in Kerala. Overall, Upadhyia’s interpretation of the menstrual taboo is that it is being carried out in the name of religion to keep women inferior to men. She ends her blog by calling India “a country where cultural practices passed off as religious ones are considered sacrosanct.”³⁷ It is clear that, even understanding the religious roots of the taboo, Upadhyia doesn’t see its continuation as religious in any sense. I would argue that she is suggesting that religion is exploited in the case of the menstrual taboo and that the taboo is inherently a social practice meant to oppress women.

There are people who believe that the menstrual taboo is necessary and important as an Indian practice. In contrast to women like Revati Upadhyia who believe that the taboo is outdated and unnecessary, other women in India support the menstrual taboo and the restrictions that

³⁷ Revati Upadhyia, “Myths and Taboos Silence Menstruating Women in India”, May 28, 2016, <http://www.theestablishment.co/2016/05/28/oppression-examined-menstruation-in-india/>

accompany it. Mythri Speaks is a registered Trust that focuses mainly on women's issues; the group conducted Interviews with women in India who have positive interpretations of the taboo. The women featured in this article don't care at all about modern science or society's "modern" view of menstruation; they are determined to be the keepers of an age old belief. The Hindu Vedic texts recognize "Doshas" as the bio-energies that make up a person; for instance: air, fire, and water. The women believe that their menstruation is a cleansing of excess doshas. The women explain that during menstruation they are more likely to absorb energies around them and that is why the cultural practices concerning menstruation exist: not entering religious spaces, avoiding cooking or touching food, avoiding sexual intercourse, restriction to menstruation huts, and the belief that menstrual blood is impure.³⁸ The menstrual taboo functions very differently in the lives of these women than it does in the life of women like Revati Upadhya.

Conclusion

From the ancient world to the modern one Indian culture has survived the Muslim Mughal Empire, British control, the struggle for and eventual gaining of independence, and the declaration of India as a secular nation. Obviously, the Mughal Empire was not a Hindu one and Great Britain was a Christian nation during the time of its control over India and yet the Hindu faith and its practices survived. The questions still remain: how and why? Why has the Hindu menstrual taboo been practiced consistently? It can be argued that religion is so deeply rooted in Indian culture that the menstrual taboo, being a specific aspect of the faith that supports a social stigma, has been highlighted and defines what it means to be a woman in India. It has been

³⁸ Mythri Speaks: "Unearthing menstrual wisdom-Why we don't go to the temple, and other practices", May 28, 2015. (mythrispeaks.wordpress.com).

demonstrated throughout this project that certain aspects of the Hindu religion have been highlighted throughout the course of change in India, specifically the 20th century, to support social structures regarding women. Men and women alike have developed their own public opinions of the taboo and are treating it as a human rights issue, not a religious issue. However, regardless of how or why the Hindu faith and practices have survived Muslim and Christian control and become an important component of secular Indian culture, it is impossible to argue that these things didn't happen. The religious taboo surrounding menstruation and the restrictions placed on menstruating women exist and function within the socio-cultural environment. The argument made here is that Hindu beliefs and values have, throughout Indian Independence, secularization, and the Hindu nationalist movement, been emphasized to reinforce and maintain social and political ideas about women. As a result, those beliefs and values have become fundamentally Indian, rather than just Hindu.

By examining the history of India in the 20th century, specifically the Hindu nationalist movement, it is clear that people who identified as Hindu saw their religious affiliation as a major aspect of their identity as Indians as well. The nationalists went so far as to declare Hindus as the only true Indians. The name "Hindu Nationalist Movement" itself signifies a pride in being a Hindu Indian, meaning that Hindus saw themselves as the rightful leaders of the nation.

Studying the ancient beginnings of the menstrual taboo and its consistent practice throughout all of the changes that India underwent, shows that something about it was beneficial for at least one group. In the same way that ancient Christian texts and Christianity as a whole can be interpreted to support certain moral and social beliefs, Hinduism has been interpreted to maintain a social stigma about women and their trustworthiness, purity, and importance.

The Hindu faith has changed and adapted in some senses to the changes in India throughout its existence. It is important to understand how the Hindu faith functions, is practiced, and is interpreted in India. To make this argument that certain aspects and values of Hinduism are interpreted in ways that reinforce social practices, it is necessary to look at Hinduism as a whole to see which aspects were highlighted in the 20th century and which weren't.

The discussion of women in India is one that is obviously central to this argument. The restrictions, negativity, and patriarchal regulation of women dates back to ancient Hindu texts and was revamped during the Hindu Nationalist movement, likely as a way to preserve Hindu control over India. Women in India struggle to keep themselves clean and unembarrassed during menstruation in a culture that views their menstruation as impure and also values purity. The negative treatment of women, especially regarding menstruation, is a direct link to ancient Hinduism and was used to preserve the idea of female inferiority.

Faith is interpreted differently by different groups; with the taboo having a historically religious background it is important to explore varying interpretations of the taboo itself. By finding out how religious and nonreligious people view the taboo, whether that be similarly or differently, it can be argued that the continuation of the taboo is the result of a social system, not a religious one.

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