

Original Research Article

Socio-cultural practices and experiences of menstruation among adolescents and women of Kurichiya tribe of Wayanad: an ethnographic study

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ABSTRACT

Background: Menstruation and related cultural practices are widespread in Indian communities, particularly in tribal settlements. Past studies have highlighted the negative impact of these practices on women's mental health and well-being. However, there remains a lack of comprehensive understanding regarding the specific effects of these practices on women's lives.

Methods: This study utilised an urban ethnographic research design to explore cultural practices and lived experiences within urban settings. It focused on Kurichiya settlements in Wayanad's Chennalode area, part of Kalpetta municipal town in Kerala's Wayanad district. Fourteen participants, women and adolescent girls aged 15 to 50, were involved in the study.

Results: The qualitative analysis identified three core themes: cultural practices of menstruation, women's menstrual experiences, and perspectives on menstrual practices. The examination of cultural practices revealed subthemes: menarche celebration and monthly period rituals. Women's menstrual experiences encompassed emotional experiences during menarche and each monthly period. Perspectives on menstrual practices highlighted effects on mental well-being and participant's advocacy for change.

Conclusions: The study portrayed how traditional practices affect daily life for Kurichiya women, causing emotional disruption. Despite some liberalisation, a full shift in these customs remains elusive in current times.

Keywords: Women, Menstruation, Experiences, Practices, Qualitative, Ethnographic

INTRODUCTION

Menstruation has been an important topic of discussion since the origin of life.¹ Primitive people recognized this phenomenon without any physiological bases. It was understood as bleeding occurring every twenty-eighth day without any specific reason or a visible wound.² Later it was accepted as a biological phenomenon in which the inner lining of the uterus sheds and leaks through the vagina every month if the egg released is not fertilised.^{3,4}

Different ethnic groups and cultures have distinct views on menstruation.⁵ Menstrual blood is portrayed in a variety of ways—as sacred, a gift from the gods, or a penalty for sin but it is virtually always magical and strong.⁶ In India, different ethnic groups celebrate a girl's first menstruation in different ways.⁵ When a girl begins to menstruate, it is marked by a large ritual known as '*Manjal Neerattu Vizha*' [Yellow water festival] in various districts of Tamil Nadu, in portions of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, it is known as '*Peddamanishi Pandaga*' [an adult's festival], and in some regions of Karnataka, this ritual is known as the

'*Proudavasthe Kaarya*' [half saree function].⁷ It has, however, always been surrounded by myths and taboos that keep women from participating in many facets of socio-cultural life.⁸

Among the Hindu population in Kerala, menstruating women are often secluded in separate rooms, prohibited from entering the kitchen, prayer rooms, and sacred sites, served meals on separate plates, and instructed to bathe in nearby lakes or rivers, reflecting the cultural perception of menstruation as impure.⁹ Menstruating women are prohibited from performing religious rituals among Kerala's Muslim population.¹⁰ During this period, they are not required to attend religious sessions or lectures. In the Muslim community, sexual activity during menstruation is also considered impure. When seven days have passed since the start of menstruation, the lady is considered clean, and sexual contact is allowed.¹⁰

Within Kerala's diverse population, varying perspectives on menstruation are observed, with indigenous communities like the Paniya and Uralikuruma practising customs that entail women to seclude themselves in separate rooms during their monthly cycles, while also observing special rituals for first menstruation, such as the '*vayassariyichu kalyana*' [first period celebration], which until performed, restricts their freedom of movement and contact with the outside world.¹¹ The exploration of cultural aspects related to menstruation within tribal communities has been relatively sparse in academic research. Existing studies have often centred on broader reproductive health themes or general cultural practices, rather than delving deeply into the specific customs and beliefs surrounding menstruation in these populations. Moreover, the focus has predominantly been on a limited number of tribal groups, leaving a significant portion of tribal communities understudied in this context.

According to a study, the menstrual flow is accompanied by varied emotional reactions, and various menstrual cycle problems significantly impact physical, emotional, and social well-being.² The menstrual cycle also causes pain, physical discomfort, effects on mental health, abnormal uterine bleeding, and other issues that lower the quality of life.¹² But studies hardly ever touch on the idea of mental well-being in relation to menstruation. A variety of researchers focused solely on the topic of menstrual hygiene and physical health.^{8,11,12} The majority of existing literature has overlooked the importance of understanding women's perspectives on cultural practices and norms surrounding menstruation especially among the tribal population. But it is important to gain insight into the perceptions of menstruation and associated cultural practices among women and young girls, and to comprehend how these aspects influence their mental well-being among the tribal groups. Additionally, there is a lack of research examining the impact of these behaviours, whether positive or negative, from the direct perspective of tribal women.

Thus the current study investigates more on the practices and cultural aspects related to menstruation among the Kurichiya tribe in the Wayanad district of Kerala. This specific community was selected for the study precisely because they have not been adequately represented in prior research.

METHODS

Study design

Urban ethnographic design is employed to gain in-depth insights into the cultural practices, and lived experiences within urban settings. Pickvance emphasises that ethnographic research serves as a vital instrument in comprehending the intricate facets of urban life, offering researchers the means to scrutinise the routine experiences and behaviours of individuals and communities within their urban surroundings.¹³ This approach aided in a better understanding of traditional customs surrounding menstruation, as well as a deeper comprehension of their personal experiences and opinions.

Study setting

The study was conducted in Wayanad district of Kerala, which is home to a large number of tribal communities. However, this research specifically focused on the Kurichiya tribal population, as their practices have been less represented in previous studies. This study specifically concentrated on the Kurichiya settlements in Wayanad's Chennalode region which comes under Kalpetta municipal town.

Participants and sampling

This qualitative study included women and adolescent girls of the Kurichiya community, aged between 15 to 50 years. Menstruating women and girls who were well-articulable and without any physical or mental illness were included in this study. Samples were selected based on the convenience and availability of participants within the tribal group. In this tribal settlement, there were approximately 15 samples within the specified age category. 14 participants were selected from this pool based on their willingness and ability to effectively articulate their experiences.

Interview guide

Before commencing data collection, an interview guide was prepared. This guide encompassed essential elements such as socio-demographic information and a structured outline of topics to be addressed during the interview, ensuring a conducive environment for open and unstructured conversation.¹⁴ The initial development of this guide was carried out by the first author, with subsequent validation provided by the second author. Additionally, input from other esteemed researchers with expertise in qualitative research was sought to further

refine the guide and enhance its effectiveness in capturing comprehensive and insightful data.¹⁵

Data collection

Given the ethnographic nature of this study, the first author allocated substantial time immersing herself within the community to keenly observe and delve into the cultural dimensions surrounding menstruation. In the initial stages of the research, the researcher took the approach of reaching out to every family within the settlement, investing time and effort in establishing a foundation of trust and rapport with the community members. It was only after a substantial period of building these relationships that the researcher proceeded to conduct the interview procedures.

An unstructured interview was employed as a data-collecting method. This allowed individuals to share their unique experiences without being constrained by a specific question. Following the consent of the participants, the face to face interviews were audio recorded. The interview began with a discussion of their community and cultural perspectives on menstruation, before moving on to its impact on their everyday life and mental health. The experiences and viewpoints were explored as the interview progressed.

The data collection methodology extended beyond interviews to encompass participant observation, allowing the researcher to witness firsthand various facets of their culture, including practices such as the 'orekod' [shed] and the tradition of bathing in the river. Participant observation added more information to the study and helped to learn what had not been informed by the participants. The researcher also took the field notes of the interviews and observations while conducting each interview. The interviews lasted between 35 to 40 minutes.

Data analysis

The audio recordings were in the language Malayalam. These data were transcribed directly into English as the researcher was bilingual. This study opted for thematic analysis.^{16,17} The transcribed data were managed and coded with the assistance of QDA miner lite software. A few qualitative researchers have suggested that a single individual would be enough to do the analysis if the person is immersed in it.^{18,19,20} Thus the first author was engaged in conducting interviews, transcribing, coding, and data analysis. Initially, data was reviewed multiple times to get familiar with the data. Initial coding was generated for the data using in vivo coding method. Then the researcher tried to search for themes according to the study's needs and see if any clusters can be created for the study. Then, larger themes and subthemes were identified after reviewing the themes. Codes and themes formulated were discussed and reviewed by the co-author to ensure consistency and credibility. Thus finally the entire data was shown as two broad themes.

RESULTS

Interviews were undertaken with 14 women of the Kurichiya tribal clan. Most of the participants have completed their education at or above the 12th standard level, with only three having educational attainment of 10th standard or below. Among the participants there were 8 married women (57.1%) and 6 unmarried women (42.8%) in which 3 were employed (21.4%), 6 were unemployed (42.8%), and 5 were (35.7%).

Table 1: Socio-demographic details of the participants.

Socio-demographic variables	Results
Mean age of the participants (in years)	28.6
Education status of participants N (%)	
SSLC/ less than SSLC qualification	3 (21.4)
Higher secondary education (12th standard)	5 (35.7)
More than higher secondary education	6 (42.8)
Marital status N (%)	
Married women	8 (57.1)
Unmarried women	6 (42.8)
Employment status N (%)	
Employed	3 (21.4)
Unemployed	6 (42.8)
Student	5 (35.7)

Based on the analysis of the collected data three themes were identified such as cultural practices of menstruation, women's menstrual experiences, and perspectives on menstrual practices.

Cultural practices of menstruation

In the Kurichiya community, the onset of menarche is marked by elaborate celebrations deeply embedded in traditional customs and rituals. Distinct practices and ceremonies are observed during the monthly menstrual cycle. All fourteen participants in the study shared their firsthand encounters with the grand celebration of their first menstruation. The cultural practices within the community can be categorised into two primary aspects: menarche celebration and monthly period rituals.

Menarche celebration

Once a girl starts menstruating in the Kurichiya population, she will be moved to a shed next to her home till the end of her period. After the period, a date will be fixed for the celebration of menarche- 'Therandkalyanam'. This is done on astrological bases and also by checking the availability of wild meat. The elders are keen on getting wild meat before the celebration as it is very much important in their culture to serve only wild meat for this ceremony. On the decided day of the ceremony, the girl will take a bath in the nearby river along with the elderly women in the community. She will be then dressed up in a saree and will

receive a lot of gifts and ornaments as she reaches her menarche. The girl will enter her house after chewing and spitting tobacco in the front yard of her house. She will then revolve around the lit lamp and receive a blessing from the elder women. Then a special food called 'chakkarakanji' [Sweetened rice porridge] is served to her. This tribal group follows these rituals and beliefs without any flaws. Each of the 14 participants contributed their recollections of the ceremony.

Monthly period rituals

On a monthly basis, women within the Kurichiya population adhere to specific sets of rituals that have become integral to their way of life. The menstruating women have to stay inside their own room till the end of their period. They are not allowed to touch anything or anyone. Even there are strict restrictions to not go in front of other people. It is important for them to maintain a certain distance from people during the period. Clothes, plates, and other things used by the woman have to be cleaned by themselves.

Participants also highlighted that in the past, during their menstrual periods, they were relocated from their homes to a hut adjacent to their houses called 'Orekode' [a hut constructed using coconut leaves]. However, in recent times, women are not relocated but instead encouraged to situate themselves in a designated corner within their homes during their menstrual cycle.

Women's menstrual experiences

In the Kurichiya community, women have conveyed a range of sentiments and emotions linked to menarche and menstruation as a whole. These overarching themes are further categorised into two subthemes: menarche experiences and emotional encounters during menstruation

Menarche experiences

There were different feelings associated with menarche and its celebrations as expressed by the participants. All participants expressed two different experiences: a sense of shyness and nervousness. Majority of the participants spoke about their feeling of shyness and awkwardness during the first-period celebration. They mentioned that they were the focus of attention for the day. Few of the participants also spoke about being nervous as they were new to all these practices.

Emotional encounters during menstruation

A lot of emotional experiences related to the monthly period were expressed by the participants. Nine out of the fourteen participants felt lonely, abandoned, or avoided during their periods due to the existing practices. Staying alone during the menstruating days, unable to do any work has made the participants emotionally weak. Some participants recounted instances where they missed significant events and ceremonies due to menstruation. They expressed feelings of abandonment during these crucial occasions because of their periods. These experiences significantly influenced their emotional landscape, contributing to a sense of exclusion and emotional impact during those times.

Perspectives on menstrual practices

Women hold diverse viewpoints regarding the menstrual practices within their culture. Some have highlighted the detrimental impact of these rituals on their mental well-being, while others have advocated for the necessity of change. Consequently, two sub themes emerge from these perspectives: effects on women's mental well-being and advocating for change

Effects on women's mental well-being

Participants have emphasised that these practices have adverse effects on their mental well-being. They influence their productivity and contribute to feelings of loneliness. The majority of participants conveyed that the cultural practices and associated restrictions had led to mental exhaustion. They expressed feeling isolated and not understood within their community due to these customs. Several women shared their sentiments of not being heard or supported when they required attention and care the most, highlighting a lack of understanding and empathy toward their needs during such times.

Advocating for change

Women have emphasised the necessity for a shift in this tradition to assert their right to freedom and choice. All participants unanimously advocated for change, emphasising the necessity of improving living standards for the younger generations. Some participants specifically highlighted the importance of reevaluating cultural norms, pointing out the irony that their own parents were deprived of essential care during their final days due to menstruation-related restrictions.

Table 2: Themes and subthemes.

Themes and subthemes	No. of participants contributing (n=14)	Verbatim
Cultural practices of menstruation		
Menarche celebration	14	'On that day I took a bath in the river along with older women in the community, they dressed me up in a saree. I was brought to the house and an older woman gave me tobacco with areca nut and betel to

Continued.

Themes and subthemes	No. of participants contributing (n=14)	Verbatim
		<p>chew. I had to chew it until it turned red and made me spit it in front of the house.’ (Participant 3, 17 years)</p> <p>‘One of the difficult things to obtain for therandkalyanam is wild meat. This celebration is incomplete without serving wild meat. No other meat will be served for this function. So the dates are fixed based on the availability of wild meat also. The elders and men in the community fix a date and go hunting in the woods. If they didn’t get any wild animals they would hunt again and again until they got meat. These customs are still maintained without any alterations.’ (Participant 2, 47 years)</p>
Monthly period rituals	12	<p>‘Also during our period, we had to stay at the orekode throughout our period. Oh god...that was really tough, which no longer exists. These days children are made to use one room within the house, rather than staying out in the orekode.’ (Participant 2, 47 years)</p> <p>‘During menstruating days I have to stay alone in a room without touching any common objects in the house. Plates and tumblers were provided to me which were washed and cleaned by myself till the end of my period. Also, dresses have to be washed by myself in the nearby river. It is prohibited to touch people also. It is also important to maintain a certain distance from people during the period.’ (Participant 1, 27 years)</p>
Women’s menstrual experiences		
Menarche experiences	10	<p>‘I felt shy. Because it’s the first time I am being celebrated. Everyone was focused on me and I was the centre of attention. So it was kind of an awkward experience. Especially since we were dressed up like a goddess which makes it even more awkward for us.’ (Participant 5, 24 years)</p> <p>‘I was very nervous, trembling with fear. I didn’t know how to behave and how to present myself in front of others. They were all staring at me’. (Participant 10, 26 years)</p>
Emotional encounters during menstruation	8	<p>‘But emotionally I have felt bad about this a lot of times because of this restriction. Because I feel lonely most of the time. I can’t do any of my work freely. Even if I am sent to school, I have to maintain a distance from other students from my own community since I am menstruating. The most important thing I remember about it is that I have missed a lot of functions and events due to my periods.’ (Participant 3, 17 years)</p> <p>‘You know what most importantly people avoid you from everything if you are on your period. I have missed lots of important functions in my family. (Speaks in low voice and speech breaks). Also when my mother was sick and was on her last days I was not allowed to take care of her since I was on my period. Even during my father’s 41st day of demise, I was sitting alone in that room crying when everyone was at home performing rituals and offering prayers. This was one of the worst memories I have.’ (Participant 2, 47 years)</p>
Perspectives on menstrual practices		
Effects on women’s mental well-being	7	<p>‘But emotionally I have felt bad about this a lot of times because of this restriction. Because I feel lonely most of the time. I can’t do any of my work freely. Even if I am sent to school, I have to maintain a distance from other students from my own community since I am menstruating. The most important thing I remember about it is that I have missed a lot of functions and events due to my periods.’ (Participant 3, 17 years)</p> <p>‘I feel like this practice actually worsens women’s physical and emotional well-being. It is a time when every woman expects consideration, love, and attention. But in our culture, every girl is</p>

Continued.

Themes and subthemes	No. of participants contributing (n=14)	Verbatim
		isolated and avoided. We are excluded from gatherings and functions which actually makes us feel lonely. We won't be having anyone to talk to or share our emotional fluctuations with. So I feel that people have to change their attitude towards menstruation and menstruating women. Because sometimes their way of treating us is not helping us, instead it's worsening our situation.' (Participant 1, 27 years)
Advocating for change	11	<p>'Honestly speaking I am not happy about this custom. It's high time for it to change. At least the new generation should be treated in a better way.' (Participant 1, 27 years)</p> <p>'I feel bad about it. It needs to be changed. If we can't look after our parents when they are in need, or if we can't attend our parents's funeral then what's the point of all these rituals and practices!! I try to give everything in the best possible way to my children. Because I don't want them to struggle the way I struggled. This has to stop and everyone has to live freely with all the freedom to work or study without thinking about menstruation as a restriction.' (Participant 2, 47 years)</p>

DISCUSSION

This study noted that the Kurichiya tribe is rich in menstrual practices and customs which impact Kurichiya women's mental well-being in several ways. These traditional practices have influenced their life by making them emotionally vulnerable. Thus this study found three major themes through the qualitative data analysis: cultural practices of menstruation, women's menstrual experiences and perspectives on menstruation.

There is a plethora of practices associated with menarche. '*Therandkalyanam*' is one of the biggest ceremonies in the Kurichiya culture where the people celebrate menarche. Such practices of menarche celebration have been discussed in previous research also.^{21,22} The previous studies primarily emphasised raising awareness, whereas the current study is distinct in their emphasis on conducting in-depth investigations into these practices. This represents a significant departure from earlier research.

When comparing these practices with those observed in neighbouring countries, a notable resemblance in cultural traditions becomes apparent. Prior to the '*Therandkalyanam*' ceremony, there are established customs that menstruating girls must adhere to. One prominent practice involves relocating the girl to a nearby shed known as '*Orekode*'. Such practices have also been documented in earlier research conducted with rural communities in far western Nepal.²³

Preparations for the forthcoming celebration include activities such as hunting for wild meat and setting a date for the '*Therandkalyanam*' ceremony. On the actual day of the '*Therandkalyanam*', a series of rituals are followed. These include bathing in the river, donning a saree, chewing tobacco, and re-entering the house after a 7-day period of isolation in the tent. The practice of tent isolation

during menstruation is not unique to this culture, and it has been discussed in previous literature as well.^{23,24}

But the current study is very unique in terms of exploring not just the rituals but also the associated emotions experienced by individuals. It revealed that the predominant emotion linked to menarche was shyness. Furthermore, the study observed that women experienced intense feelings of shame, shyness, embarrassment, and awkwardness during their menstrual periods. The feelings of shyness and shame have been reported in a prior study conducted by Kemigisha et al.²⁵

The monthly period is also surrounded by a sequence of practices. These practices have been followed by even the younger girls without fail to date. These are the practices that are barriers for Kurichiya women in terms of performing their daily routine. All the women in the entire population of the Kurichiya clan would have to restrict themselves from their freedom of movement by remaining inside their rooms till the end of periods. It has been observed and noted that there are significant regulations in terms of performing religious acts; similar findings were given by previous research.²⁶ Also, our study points out the practice of untouchability that the Kurichiya women have to face while on their periods. Women are discriminated and abandoned during their monthly periods. The various restrictions such as untouchability, staying in another room and denied entry to the kitchen and prayer room are discussed in a previous study also.^{27,28,29} However, it's worth noting that these studies did not delve into the potential detrimental effects on women's mental well-being.

There are a lot of emotionalities associated with these customs. Women in this community have been facing loneliness, sadness, the feeling of avoidance, and discrimination. There is evidence of intense pain as described by the participants. This study understood that the women felt disappointed while left alone at home in the

name of periods when an important family celebration is occurring. The practice of untouchability and tent stay during periods has been previously discussed in related studies among Nepalese women.^{23,30} Menarche-related similar customs have also been discussed in a few previously written literature.³¹ Indeed, there is a scarcity of studies related to menstrual practices in India. This scarcity prompted an exploration of neighbouring Asian countries to gain a broader understanding of these cultural phenomena.

Even though menstrual practices are mandatorily maintained in this tribal population, the mental well-being of Kurichiya women is a neglected issue. Women's emotions, feelings, and difficulties are not considered in this community. This study found that cultural practices impact women's daily life which results in loneliness, low mood, and sadness among women; this has been discussed earlier in studies.^{31,32} Menstruation is enclosed with social stigma rather than being understood scientifically. There is an increased need for awareness in this tribal settlement in terms of guiding them about the scientific aspects of menstruation. There are researches that discuss improving the education status of women to overcome the cultural practices and taboos faced.⁸ Women empowered through education will be able to make appropriate decisions for themselves.

While this study effectively explored the cultural intricacies and real-life encounters related to menstruation among Kurichiya tribe women, it is important to acknowledge a significant constraint in the form of a limited sample size, which consisted of just fourteen participants. Several literature indicate that an adequate range for qualitative research participants falls between 5 to 50 individuals.^{33,34} Commentators further propose that for a homogeneous population, a qualitative sample size as small as 10 may be sufficient.³⁵ However, a broader representation of Kurichiya clans could have provided a more comprehensive insight into the experiences of women in this community. Additionally, while the study primarily focused on the experiences of menstruation, there exists an opportunity for a comparative approach, encompassing women of different age groups, to elucidate the cultural evolution of menstruation within the tribe. A more in-depth exploration of the cultural traditions and celebrations of the Kurichiya tribe could also be a valuable avenue for future research. Nonetheless, the study yielded sufficient and pertinent information pertaining to the chosen topic of study.

CONCLUSION

This study successfully delved into the diverse cultural practices and traditions linked to menstruation within the Kurichiya community of Kerala, shedding light on their enduring significance. The existing practices and their influence on women's day-to-day life were implied through this study. There are significant emotional experiences and feelings that disrupt the Kurichiya

women's life. Even though these customs have been made liberal, a complete change in these practices cannot be seen in this era also. There is an increased need to understand menstruation at its scientific roots, rather than believing it is a curse. Women's inclusive community is the need of the hour. Thus there should be an emphasis on awareness creation among cultural groups. Also, the proper intervention has to be done in terms of women's lowered mood, loneliness, and sadness as a result of social stigma. The interventions and approaches have to be planned and implemented by aligning with the local and cultural context.

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