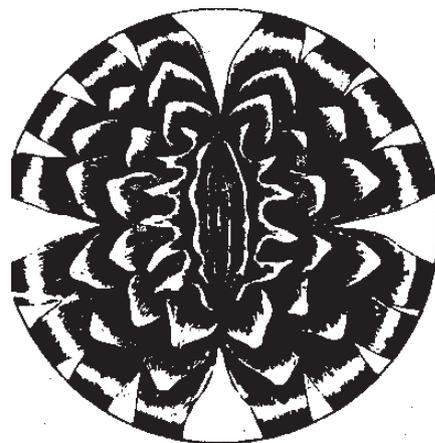


Reclaiming Our Energies



WHY are we as women kept in ignorance of how our bodies function ? Why is this ignorance defined as innocence, given a moral stamp of “virtue”?

Children learn about bodily processes and how to handle them as a part of their growing-up. Boys are expected to pick up information in schools – older boys inform and initiate younger ones. But family, education and religion conspire to check the process of “growing up”, that is of acquiring knowledge and control, in girls. We are kept in childlike ignorance regarding our bodies. Therefore our experience of our bodily processes often comes to us as a terrible trauma. We are shocked, guilty, afraid. We pick up distorted information or grope helplessly in the dark. How can we acquire a grasp over life if we are denied minimal knowledge and control of our own bodies which are the bases from which we move out into the world ?

As mothers, we pass on to our daughters all the helpless fear, ignorance, guilt and shame which have been instilled in us over the years.

Control over women’s sexuality and reproductive capacity is central to women’s oppression in patriarchal society. And to keep us oppressed we must be kept in fear. Fear of authority is at its core related to fear of one’s self. As women, we have been taught to fear ourselves, to fear freedom so that we may not desire it. We are taught that our sexuality is dangerous and evil, that it must be externally controlled otherwise it will destroy us. The external controls over us can be successful only in alliance with the internalized policing system – the fear, guilt, superstition, self hatred which are built into each of us over the years by male-dominated culture, education, religion, and channelized through the family.

To break through our oppression as women, it is therefore necessary to understand and attach both the external and the internal mechanisms which work together to oppress us. In this column we hope to (a) study the actual ways in which women’s health is devalued, neglected and destroyed in different communities, castes, classes, and (b) explore how we as women have experienced and struggled against this oppression. We also hope to counterpose the facts as they are against the myths, stereotypes and taboos which deceive women and keep us

enslaved.

We formed a group to work around health issues so that this column could be the product of collective exploration and discovery. We decided to begin with menstruation – an experience common to all women, and often a traumatic experience which shapes our view of ourselves as inferior and unclean. All cultures and religions in male-dominated society reinforce this inequality by making our sexuality and reproductive capacity seem like liabilities rather than the very valuable assets they are.

We sat together and talked about what the experience of menstruation had come to mean for each of us. We also talked to other women. Though this is not a wholly representative cross-section, it does include women from various communities, income groups and age groups ranging from early twenties to late thirties. Here are some extracts from what women had to say.

Sperm or Ovum ?

We started by each one of the us saying what she knew about menstruation as a biological process :

A (doing doctoral research) : ... The information I now have is what I got from my biology books in class 9 and 10. The sperm, the sperm is released... The twelfth day after menstruation it comes out and stays in the uterus and after the 28th day it comes out in the form of blood. This is the information I have, may be I’m wrong. I never tried to find out more later...

B (doing doctoral research) : ... I also got to know the facts when I was 14. We had a very good teacher for health science so my facts are slightly better than hers! I know that the ova are released into the uterus and if there isn’t a sperm fertilizing the ova in time, then the placenta which is ready to receive the fertilized egg comes apart and comes through. I never tried to get more information...

C (postgraduate) : ... My mother had told me at about age 12 that the lining of the uterus is prepared for the baby and if you don’t have a baby, the lining comes out. I got a little more information through some novels and psychology books but it was very hazy – I didn’t know till very recently where the ovaries are. I wasn’t interested in reading biology books to find out anything because I thought I knew enough...

D (doing doctoral research) : ... My mother told me nothing at all, just showed me how to protect myself. In convent school, the nuns just skipped it... Nothing registered, I didn't know what was vagina, what was uterus. I got the highest marks in biology but when it came to this information, I just blocked it out... The nuns had stuck holy pictures over the diagrams in the biology books. Some of the girls tried unsticking these. It was more a game for me than any curiosity because by then I'd lost all curiosity on the subject... The whole class was punished for this attempt... I remember when I was about 16, for months together I was worried that I might be pregnant. I didn't know how one got pregnant, so I would remember some incident six years ago when someone had tried to touch me and would think may be I had got pregnant then and if anyone touched my stomach they would find out... I learnt at about age 23 or later that there are two openings – the vagina and the urinary opening... Yet I never bothered to read a book and clarify.

E : (social activist) : ... My mother didn't tell me anything. When I started menstruating, she just showed me what to use. I asked her : "Mummy, why don't you take me to a doctor ? Have I not got some disease ?" Then my cousin sister who is much older than I, started laughing and told me : "Oh no, this will happen to you every month now." At about the age of 13, I used to discuss it with two of my girl friends in school. Sudha knew a little more, she had a cousin brother who probably told her. She knew that pregnancy comes about through genital contact. We were not sure whether there were three holes for urine, menstruation and stool. We used to have big debates about whether there could be three in such a small space. When I was in college, I read a book. Then we examined ourselves with a mirror. When my mother saw the book I was reading, she said : "I'll tell your father what kind of books you have started reading." I was so afraid... and felt very guilty. I read the book in hiding... Later I realized that this was the knowledge I should have been given much earlier and not having it caused so much confusion in my life...

Depression Is Withheld Knowledge

Why was it that none of us had ever tried to find out more about a process we undergo every month ? What in our first and later experience of menstruation, what in the attitudes of those around us, in the ideas we imbibe from religion, education, literature, myth, had made us think our sexuality was something at worst to be hated, at best to be ignored or hidden ?

A (Tamilian Brahmin community) : ... I was 13 when I first got it. I have an elder sister so I knew what was going to be done to me if I had it. I didn't tell my parents. But the second time I had to tell because I was worried about protecting myself. Then I was segregated and made to sit in another room for three days. On the fourth day, I was given a bath and there was a lot of singing : "May she get married and produce sons, 11 sons, 16 sons, and so on." I felt very funny and shy. I had to start wearing a half-sari and my mother told me to be very careful, not to let men touch me in the bus, not to touch my brother while talking to him, not to

have male friends. She didn't say anything about how and why menstruation happens. Earlier, when I was ten years old, my cousin brother who was my age, had told me that I would have blood coming out of me. So I knew just this... The first time I bled I was scared, very insecure. Before I used to go out and play, sing, dance, be happy. Now there was a sudden change in my life. I realized that it was something regular that was going to happen, a thing that happened to girls.....

B : ...I started when I was ten. I didn't know anything about it. Everyone in the family was very upset that I had it so early. The family physician who was a big fat man, examined me to see if anything else was wrong. After two months I started having it every fortnight for two months. It was just dreadful and they did not tell me why they were taking me to the doctor. I was just told to use sanitary towels, that was all. ...I didn't talk about it to anyone. It was just something awful that was happening...

C : My mother had told me about it earlier so I knew I would get it and I didn't want it at all. I got in once when I was 13 and then it went and came back when I was around 17. I thought the later it comes, the better – I think I would not to have it. I knew my mother was worried. She took me to a woman doctor but I didn't let myself be examined and I didn't take the hormones she prescribed...

D : I started menstruating at about age 13 and I knew nothing about it at all except that as a small child I had seen the sanitary towels of my aunts lying around. I didn't tell my mother. I just clamped up. That was one period of my life when I felt totally isolated. On the third day my mother noticed that my pants were stained and she asked me.

All she said was that I wouldn't grow any taller now, and this was at an age when I wanted to grow taller. After that, there was a long period of estrangement from my mother. I found terrible hatred against her welling up in my mind. Nothing explained. A terrible negative feeling about myself as a woman, about my body, began then. Almost as if I had done something shameful. This persists even today...

E : I started menstruating when I was 11 and it came as a shock. My mother's first reaction was : "Oh god, now this problem has started." Her saying this left a very deep impression on my mind. Though my mother and I are very close, she didn't tell me anything... After ten months, my periods stopped and when my mother came to know this, she started suspecting me. She took me to a lady doctor. I couldn't understand why I was being examined. My mother kept asking me whether I had gone around with any boy, kept asking many questions so I got an idea that if one goes out with a boy, some problem will be caused, something goes wrong with your stomach. I didn't know anything about pregnancy. One day after the doctor had seen me two or three times, my mother told me : "*Beta*, if you don't get your period, it means you are pregnant." I asked "But how does that happen ?" but she didn't tell me even then... For years I suffered severely during menstruation. When I bled I didn't know what was wrong with my body and because of that I used to have extreme stomach

aches, vomiting and giddiness. I would not go to college for two days. I would really be very unwell and now I realize that it was only psychological. After BA, when I read and understood what it was all about, the problem disappeared of itself. I don't suffer like that any more...

In A Dark Room

Sometimes society represses our sexuality in a way that menstruation becomes for us a shameful secret. Sometimes, our sexuality is overemphasized in a distorted way, so that our monthly bleeding becomes for us a badge of public shame. In either case, our sexuality becomes a burden for us. We are made to feel that the biological fact of our being women (of which menstruation is one visible sign) makes it impossible for us to be equal to men. Thus exploitation and injustice are disguised as biological destiny. From childhood, our sexuality is made into such a big burden for us that we grow up to hate and despise ourselves for being what we are, rather than hating the system that oppresses us. Since we do not experience our sexuality freely, we do not know what our sexuality is. We only know what male-dominated society in our particular time and place, chooses to tell us.

We found through our discussions, that our experience of menstruation and the taboos associated with it, had profoundly affected our view of ourselves as women.



A :... We are not supposed to go into the kitchen during menstruation, not to prepare meals, not to go to the temple, not to sing songs. My grandmother used to say that if I talk to the priest or if anyone touches me, I will become blind. It was never explained why, I was just regularly told this every time. My mother says that when she was a girl, they used to put menstruating women in the cowshed and food would be thrown to them. Even now we are allowed to eat only after everyone else has eaten. In many houses in Madras, all the menstruating women are supposed to stay together in a special room in the house. It is a very dark, dingy room with no window. When they go to the toilet, they have to call out : "I'm coming, all of you keep away, I'm coming..." My family is very conservative. My husband would never touch me during my period. A man is supposed to die if he does so. Now I don't tell my mother when I have my

periods, otherwise I'll have to observe the restrictions. But in my husband's house, I had to tell my mother-in-law because she used to keep count. I liked the respite that came with it. I would be kept in a separate room for three days, no one came near me to stop me from reading. I enjoyed this. I didn't mind not having intercourse. I have a general aversion for men during that period... I'm happy to be a woman. But if there was a way of getting rid of menstruation, of removing the uterus, I'd definitely get rid of it...

B (Bengali family) : ... In our community, we are not allowed to worship, pray or go into the temple during the first three days of menstruation. We are supposed to be polluted because menstruating is like excreting and since we're doing it all the time, we are filthy. My friends in school used to discuss it and many girls felt it was right to segregate us because we were dirty. Many Christian women do not take communion while menstruating... Now I make it a point to tell my mother : "See, I'm having my period and going to the temple"... There are many times when I wish to be a boy. There are so many things one is not allowed to do, so many places one can't go alone because one is a girl. These things happen every day. I definitely don't enjoy menstruation but I wouldn't like to remove my uterus - it's not as bad as that. But it's uncomfortable. You have to be on watch because you can't go around with stained clothes. I do tend to get irritable...

C (inter-caste, inter-regional family) : There were no taboos in my family though my mother used to say not to play strenuous games. But I felt it was a horrible thing to have. Also it was linked up with the idea of having a baby and I didn't want one. I couldn't imagine how the baby squeezed through the vagina. It seemed like a very painful, tortuous process. I didn't see any need to go through that. I used to say that I'd adopt a baby. My mother told me when I grow up I'll want a baby but I still don't. During menstruation, I have pain and get irritable... The discomfort is because the fear of its suddenly starting always hangs over my head, since my cycle is not so regular. So one has either to constantly carry sanitary towels around or take the risk of suddenly being caught unprepared. In college it once happened and I didn't know what to do - whether to miss class and go home or feel humiliated with stained clothes. At college or on the road, there is no provision - where to get cotton, where to change... Even if one can find a public toilet, there is no place to keep the cotton and one has to change in the middle of filth. Washing stained clothes and disposing of the cotton is another problem... Naturally one gets irritable... One has to have it on one's mind all the time...

D : (North Indian family) :... Our family was fairly liberal, I was one of the few girls who could mix freely with boys. My mother was very proud of the fact that I could mix with boys without any selfconsciousness or stupid giggling but this was encouraged with the idea of my being absolutely sexless - as "good" as a boy. Sex was never mentioned in our family - not acknowledged as being there. I never was part of the gossip circle of girls in my class, reading romantic novels. Even at that age, I was reading Premchand and Tagore. So I blocked out this aspect of my life

altogether... Even when my cycle became irregular and I became worried, I would just make myself forget it, would tell myself that there was so many more important things in life. I was almost all mind and no body. I think my systematic ignoring of my health, not eating, not sleeping, not bothering very much about my physical needs, had a lot to do with this alienation from my body. By the time I finished college I was terribly anemic, had low blood pressure and almost nothing in my body was functioning right – just because of systematic neglect – and I had to be hospitalized...

...If I forgot to throw away the sanitary towel, my mother might make some reference to it as “dirty” and I’d feel angry, humiliated. It was associated with filth... For years I lived with terrible fears that maybe I don’t have a uterus or ovaries. The few doctors I went to refused to give me an internal exam because I wasn’t married... When I first read feminist literature, I understood what it said about sexual repression, it came hitting very, very strongly. But it certainly did not provoke my curiosity to go and find out more about my body. If ever I tried talking to other women about these problems, they were so helpless, they knew even less than I did. It was only after talking to some close male friends that I pushed myself into getting a gynecological check-up... But it was only after that and with the idea of this health column, that this very acute form of realization came that the body is important, it is the base from which we go out into the world...

E (North Indian family) :... My mother used to think I was something special during those days of menstruation. She would always give me a glass of hot milk. And if I had a quarrel with my younger brother, she would always take my side... I enjoyed the special attention because I needed that but I didn’t like this kind of demarcation... I was always forbidden to go cycling or swimming. I was in a coeducation school and after the exams, all of us, boys and girls, used to cycle down to the orchard across the river and eat guavas to our heart’s content. After I began menstruating, my mother was always telling me not to mix with boys, to stay far from them. She did not want me to join these expeditions...

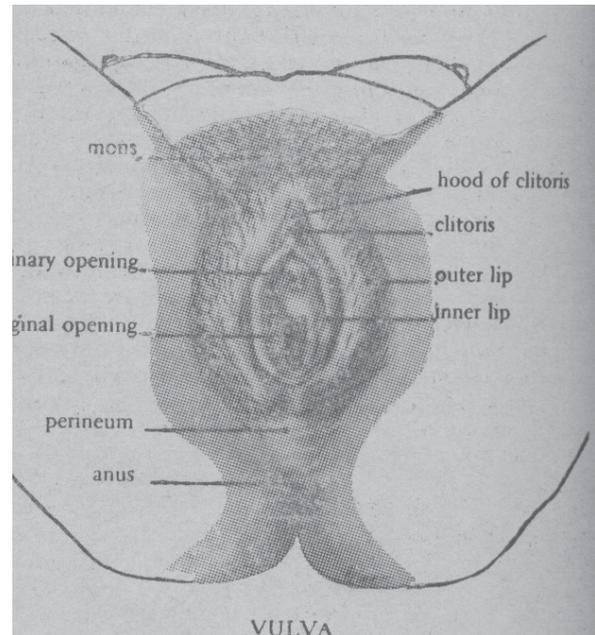
Seeing Through Our Own Eyes

Having located our areas of ignorance, we decided to together try and find out more. We began by reading aloud from *Our Bodies, Our Selves*. The authors suggest that the reader examine her own body with a mirror and a torch as she reads. At first we were not quite sure about wanting to do this but as we read, we found that the same mental blocks which had prevented us from absorbing information from biology books were once again obstructing us. The diagrams seemed remote and unfamiliar, because the picture we had in our own minds of what our body looks like was so unclear. We could see different organs in the book and learn their names but would we be able to recognize them in ourselves ?

We realized that it would be far better to look at visible parts of our own body with our own eyes rather than seeing them only indirectly through diagrams. Also, that individual self-knowledge

of one’s body is important. Imagine knowing what your own face looks like only by looking at a diagram of “the human face”!

When we look at ourselves with a mirror and a torch, this is what we can see. This whole area is called the vulva. All around the outer lips we have a growth of hair. When we part the outer lips, we can see the inner lips which are hairless and sensitive to touch. When we gently spread the inner lips, we see a delicate area between them. This area is differently coloured for different women.



The inner lips join at the top to form a soft fold of skin. Under this is the most sensitive spot in our bodies. It is made of tissue which swells when we are sexually aroused. This organ is known as the clitoris. It is the only organ in the *human* body whose function is only to create sexual pleasure (the penis and vagina have other functions besides the sexual one).

Between the inner lips we can see two openings. The small one on top is a urinary opening. It is connected by a tube to the bladder where urine is collected. Below this is a large opening called the uterus. Our menstrual flow and our babies emerge into the world from our vagina. Below the vaginal opening is the anus through which we pass stool which is collected in the rectum.

We can try relaxing our vaginal muscles and gently slide a finger into the vaginal passage. In our self-examination, we also used a plastic instrument known as a speculum, to open the vagina and look down the vaginal passage at the cervix. In hospitals, metal speculums are usually used. We used a plastic speculum for self-examination but this should not be used the first time without the guidance of a woman who has used it before.

When the vagina is open, we can look down a beautiful pink passage to the cervix which is the lower side of the uterus. In the cervix is a tiny opening which you may be able to feel with your finger as a dimple. Through this opening the menstrual flow as well as the baby come into the vaginal passage.

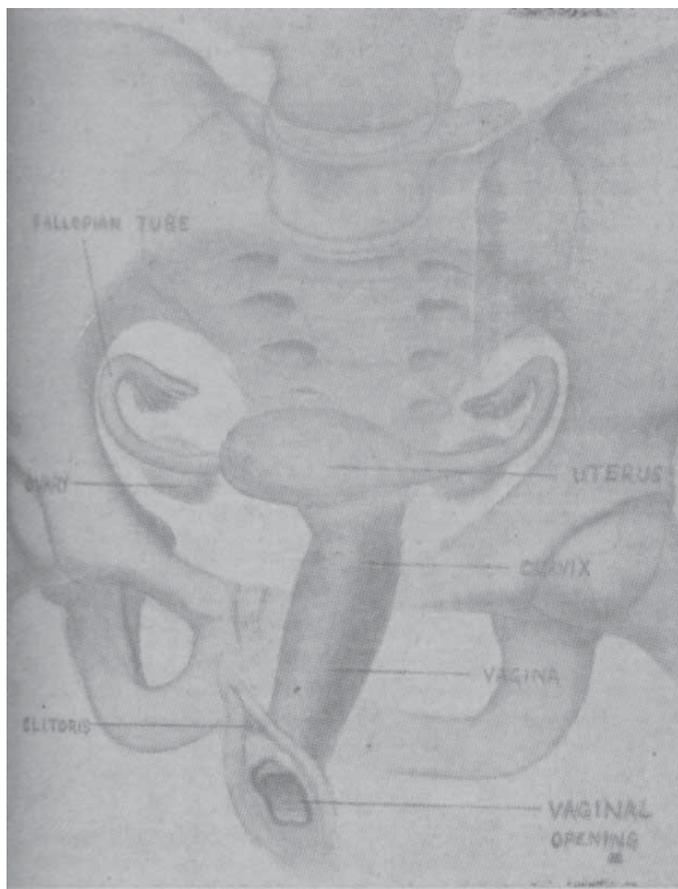
What We Cannot See

There are two cycles which take place in our bodies every month – the uterine cycle (cycle of the uterus) and the ovarian cycle (cycle of the ovaries). The uterus or womb is a fist-sized organ. It has thick walls which are one of the most powerful muscles in the human body. It is in the uterus that the baby grows and is nourished.

Two egg tubes expand from the upper end of the uterus. They are about four inches long and are shaped like buffaloes' horns. Under the end of each tube are the ovaries hand in place by tissues. Inside the ovaries of a baby girl are 300,000 to 400,000 capsules, each containing a potential egg. Every month during our reproductive years, some of these eggs begin developing. Usually each month, only one egg reaches maturity and is released. The word ovary comes from the word ovum which means egg. It is the egg which when united with the male sperm, creates the baby.

How Our Brain Affects Our Cycles

The human brain contains a gland known as the pituitary. The pituitary is influenced by social, emotional and environmental factors. That is, our being happy and unhappy, being mistreated or depressed, will have a profound effect on our brain, and thereby on the pituitary, the hormones it secretes and hence our sexuality



Front View of Our Pelvic Orgns

and reproduction process. That is why menstruation is so differently experienced by different experienced by different women.

Hormones are secretions of certain ductless organs of our body. They are released in very small quantities, under the ultimate control of the brain. By acting as chemical messengers of the brain, they help to coordinate body functions. The pituitary is considered as the chief gland of all ductless organs because hormones released by the pituitary in turn influence hormone release from other organs.

The pituitary gives out a hormone called FSH. This hormone circulates in the blood and stimulates the ovary causing some of the eggs to develop. As they grow, they pour out another hormone called estrogen. Estrogen circulates in the blood and reaches the pituitary. This sets in motion a third hormone called LH. LH in turn circulates, reaches the ovaries and causes the egg to be released. The egg travels for six and a half days through the egg tube towards the uterus.

If at this time, the woman has sexual intercourse with a man without contraception, a sperm from the man may unite with the egg, causing pregnancy. After the egg is released, the empty egg capsule gives out progesterone. Progesterone makes the womb lining thicken and prepare for pregnancy. If the woman becomes pregnant, the egg reaches the uterus and begins to grow into a baby. The baby is fed through the uterus lining so it is not shed and no menstruation occurs during the months of pregnancy.

If the woman does not become pregnant, that is if a sperm does not meet the released egg, the level of progesterone falls. This stimulates the thickened womb lining to be shed. The lining consists of blood, womb cells and mucus but the mixture gets coloured red by the blood. This shedding of the lining is experienced as menstruation.

How We Feel Now

After going through this learning process together, we discussed how we felt.

B : I had tried examining myself when I was alone, but could see nothing except the anus. I didn't know the lips would come apart. I had never done this, not even to clean myself. I had no idea what the vagina looked like. I had not even seen a small baby because I don't have younger sisters or cousins. So the experience was very, very interesting and useful for me. I was amazed when the inner lips parted. I feel much more confident now. At first when we undressed I felt nervous but after that, the way F (the woman who showed us how to do it and who is herself a nurse) did it, I felt absolutely fine. It was nice to see that we are differently made and yet it doesn't matter, we are all the same.

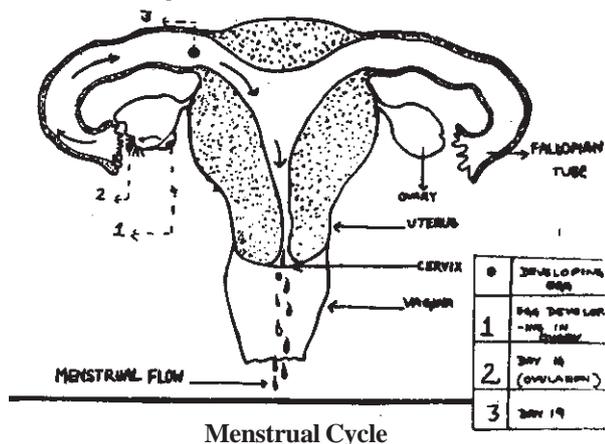
C : I had thought of trying it when I was alone but when F did it, it looked different from what I had thought, different from the diagram so I thought I should look at myself too, And now the diagram makes much more sense. Being in a group was helpful because F pointed out the various organs. On my own, I may not have been so sure where they were. And the vulva looked like a

flower. I hadn't imagined it would be colored or shaped in that way.

D : F doing it so naturally did help me. And after her, B going about it with her very healthy curiosity like the untainted curiosity of a child, that's what helped me do it too. Earlier it had been associated with a mystery, a doctor wearing horrible gloves poking around you. When the doctor touches you it's to see if something is wrong with you. But the ease with which F did it helped us feel that it is normal to look at a healthy body. It needn't be done only when you think you are diseased. What was helpful for me was that one could see what kind of relationship with one's body is possible even if one does not have it right now. One can hope one will develop that ease too.

What Women Use

The fantastic prices of sanitary towels put them far out of the reach of most of us. The cost of a packet of sanitary towels should not work out to be more than Rs. 3 but big business houses make super profits by wrapping them up in fancy cosmetic packages and selling them at anything from Rs. 6 to Rs. 12. They are treated as a luxury item and taxed heavily as well. Cheaper varieties are often manufactured under most unhygienic



Menstrual Cycle

conditions. We talked to two women activists who work among tribal women and asked how these women experience menstruation, what they use, how they dispose of it.

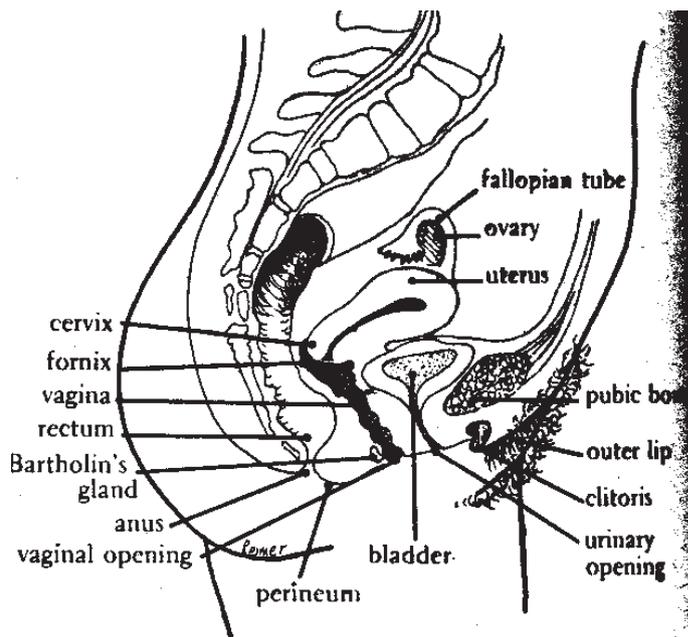
A (Madhya Pradesh) : They don't know anything about their bodies, they say this is dirty blood which comes out of our body, they don't know why it comes out. During the days of menstruation, they are outcasts even among the outcasts (these are scheduled tribes). They are not allowed to come into the house or do any domestic work. They say that they never know in advance when the period is going to start. As soon as it starts they tear off a piece of the sari they are wearing and use it. In many villages where neither cloth nor water is easily available, women use mud packs. They wet the mud a little, form a small tablet and use it against the naked body. They do not even wrap it in cloth. One woman said she uses ashes wrapped in a rag. Others said they use the papers or rags which they collect from the streets.

In the villages, women bury the sanitary cloths or papers in the wet mud on the bank of the pond. Since there is only one pond in the village, the same water has to be used for bathing and drinking. In the dewar tribe, women burn the cloths far away from their house. We suggested that they buy an old sari for Rs. 5 and use strips of that. This idea did not appeal to them. They would prefer to wear the sari rather than tear it up. We tried making packets of sanitary towels and selling them for Rs. 2. Since they cannot afford to buy these every month, we suggested that they wash and re-use the cloths. But they say that if their headman discovers the cloths in their house, he will fine them Rs. 25 and they will have to feast the whole village in atonement for the offence. They are supposed to burn all such materials.

B (Bihar) : We use a small piece of rag during menstruation. When it gets soaked through we wring it out and re-use the same rag. We keep on doing this. Water is very scarce in this area so washing it is difficult. After a while, the rag gets stiff with blood. When we walk long distances, carrying loads, the stiff rag keeps cutting into our thighs. This is very painful and begins to develop bruises so we have to carry a little oil with us. When the bruises hurt too much, we apply some oil and then keep walking. We have to squat on the ground with our legs apart so that our clothes do not get stained. (She could not travel in the bus during periods for fear of her clothes getting stained. She had no idea why menstruation occurs or how the body works).

Menstrual Hygiene

There are certain precautions we can take to guard against infections. It is better if we keep special cloths for this purpose, and not use them for other purposes at other times. We can clean the cloth by washing it with soap and water or boiling it in water, followed by drying in the sun. Sunlight kills many germs. Cotton wool or sponges can be wrapped in the cloth to increase its



absorbent capacity. Natural sponges are got from the sea and are cheaply available in coastal regions.

Another way to avoid infection is not to touch with one's fingers that part of the cloth which is going to lie against the vulva. Each time the pad is changed, the external parts need to be well washed with soap and water. Contrary to popular belief, a daily bath during menstruation is not at all harmful. We do hope that women activists working in rural areas where getting water itself, let alone clean water or cloth, is a luxury, will try raising this issue and will begin to exchange information and ideas. We would like to share such information and ideas through this column.

Why Pain and Tension ?

One of the most common symptoms during menstruation is pain. In medical language, painful periods are called dysmenorrhea. This pain can be of two types – congestive and spasmodic. Congestive pain comes a few days before the period begins and is usually either in the back or in the lower abdomen. It is always relieved as soon as menstruation starts. A woman who is constantly suffering from this type of pain before her period starts should consult a doctor because she may have an infection in her pelvic organs. However, she may be having such pain even without an infection.

The spasmodic period pain is more common. It starts on the first day of the period, may be more or less severe, and usually decreases after a day. Much more research needs to be done to define the causes of period pain.

What Medical Science Has to Say

During the phase of ovulation and menstruation the levels of estrogen and progesterone are undergoing a constant though patterned fluctuation. While this happens to all women, some women do not have any external symptoms. Many other women suffer from a wide variety of tension symptoms which are called premenstrual tension (PMT). A woman may feel uncomfortable and bloated, suffer from headaches, cramps, nausea, breast soreness, depression.

The exact nature and causes of this tension are not yet understood by medical science, and much more research needs to be done. However it is recognized that a rise of the level of estrogen and progesterone could disturb the water balance in the body. Increased water in the body tissues could create symptoms of tension.

Various cultural and environmental factors, social attitudes to menstruation, the woman's emotions and other psychological factors also contribute to the tension. The delicate interplay between all these and the hormonal changes, determines the exact nature and degree of premenstrual tension in each woman. However, many women have been somewhat relieved by lessening their consumption of salt a few days before the period starts. If

***We are indebted to an excellent book by Penelope Shuttle & Peter Redgrove, called : The Wise Wound - Menstruation and Everywomen," and to "Our Bodies Ourselves" by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective.**

we eat less salt, we lose more water through the urine, and this tends to balance the higher water level created by the hormones. This simple physical explanation is more valid for those women who tend to have a sudden weight gain of four or five pounds just before menstruation begins (due to water level rising). However, for most women, the psychological influences are powerful.

Segregated, Persecuted, Lied To

All bodily phenomena are also mental phenomena. We all know that if we are depressed or unhappy, period pains tend to worsen. Why and how does this happen ? The pituitary gland interacts with our uterus and ovaries, therefore our emotional experiences, whether we are happy or unhappy, will have a profound effect on how each of us experiences menstruation, childbirth and other biological processes. This is why the process is different for each woman. Hence the need to find out how women in different cultures suffer less or more according as they are treated and made to see themselves.

Women's so-called irrationality during our period may be in fact our truth-speaking response to this irrational oppressive society – a response which we suppress at other times but which bursts out during menstruation: "Suppose that society is a lie and the period a moment of truth which will not sustain lies." Society, of course is afraid of this truth-speaking and therefore banishes or secludes the menstruating woman.

For instance the language used in ancient times to condemn the witch and the menstruating woman was identical. A witch was supposed to bring sudden illness, to make cattle die, to cause hailstorms and ruin crops. Now read this description : "If they happen to approach a vessel of wine, it will presently sour, if they touch any standing corn, it will wither; sit they under trees, the fruit will fall, the very bees in the hive die, iron and steel

Exploding Myths

It is normal to begin menstruating any time from the age of 9 to 18.

There is no record of a woman with an absolutely regular menstrual cycle. The length of the cycle ranges from 20 to 40 days.

A normal period lasts anything from two to eight days.

All women have a normal vaginal discharge which is transparent or slightly milky and may be yellowish when dry.

"Do menstruation and the depression or pain associated with it affect our ability to function effectively and to hold positions of responsibility ? During the last three Olympics, women won gold medals and established new world records during all phases of the menstrual cycle. Isn't it amazing that women are denied responsibility on the basis of menstrual cycles, while men who are much more prone to seriously incapacitating disease like heart problems continue in highly responsible positions even after these problems are discovered ?"

take rust.” This is a description of a menstruating woman, not a witch !

It is no coincidence that male-dominated medical science prefers to tell us our suffering is almost “natural” to us as women and is not worth researching. The assumption of our woman-hating society is that it is right and proper for women to suffer. We are taught this from childhood and begin to hate ourselves and our sexuality. This self-hatred has a lot to do with our suffering at various times of our life.

Something We Can Do

Those of us who suffer from painful periods can do various things to help ourselves. Contrary to popular belief, open air exercise, games, any activity which does not make us feel uncomfortable, is good.

The large majority of women in India are not just anemic but severely malnourished. Doctors tell that anemia (which means less blood in the body due to inadequate nourishment, and therefore less resistance power) is one major cause of menstrual pains. They suggest Vitamin C, green vegetables and protein rich food such as eggs, meat, dal, soya beans to combat anemia. Milk and calcium tablets are also prescribed to compensate the decrease in blood calcium during menses.

We know that these foods are essential for building a healthy body and that general illness or weakness would naturally cause extra discomfort and depression during periods. However, even advising women to eat such food or suggesting that we “take less coffee during periods” as many “Beauty and Health” column in popular women’s magazines do so glibly, is an insult in the context of our country where most people do not get the basic minimum of food required to keep them alive, let alone in good health. Even in families where there is some access to nourishing food, many cultural pressures as well as blatant discrimination in the feeding of children, prevent young girls and women from eating as heartily as boys do. We tend to neglect our health and see it as less important. Too often we even prefer to remain thin so as to fit the vicious and artificial stereotype of an “attractive” woman.

Similarly, we know that an annual gynecological check-up is advisable so as to detect infection in its early stages. But giving such advice is futile in a society where most people have no access to medical care of any kind and women are the last to be taken to a doctor, even when nearly dying. We need to struggle for many kinds of changes and the struggle for control over our bodily processes and health is in separable from the struggle for control over resources such as food, water, medical services.

Reclaiming Our Energies

Women through the ages have asked : “What does my blood shed every month mean ?” and male authorities have answered: “It is a Curse.” But in fact the development of the menstrual cycle is a major step forward in evolution. Most animals are capable of sexual excitement only during their breeding seasons when the female is on heat but the apes and human beings are

capable of sexual arousal at any time because women’s cycles have evolved differently. In human culture, sexual energy has a significance of its own quite apart from reproduction. Woman-hating societies resent this energy of the woman, her ability to understand her sexuality and reproductive capacity.

Male-dominated society and institutions have a deep fear of the energetic woman who understands and is happy with her self, her body, her mind. So they do their best to make us miserable with our identity as women. They tell us that reproduction is the only important function of our sexuality.

Reclaiming our menstrual energy is an important part of reclaiming our bodies and our lives from male control and definition. Women together can break down the fears, doubts, shame which each of us battles against alone. And to see each other positively, joyfully, is to see ourselves anew. □

How did more than 20 million women disappear from our population ?

The 1971 census showed that there are 20 million less women in the country than there are men. This gap between the numbers of men and women has been widening ever since independence. Every year, more and more women die as compared to men. There is good evidence that the census this year will show still further decline.

How is this large-scale killing off of women taking place ? People who have studied the question all agree that there is a “systematic neglect” of women being practised within the family as a form of invisible violence. For instance, 30 to 60 per cent more girl than boy babies die in our country. Even though outright female infanticide has been declared illegal, yet deliberately neglecting girl babies to the point of letting them die is on the increase.

Often, when the question of the declining sex ratio is raised, people dismiss it as an academic question, as if it is a matter of mere arithmetic and statistics. But this is in fact a life and death issue for women. The women who are dying in greater numbers every year are not victims of accidents or even of the atrocities which get reported. How exactly are they done to death ? In what ways are women’s lives neglected, devalued and encouraged to wither away ? What are the socio-economic and cultural factors which contribute to making women’s lives more dispensable ?

*We plan to bring out a special issue of **Manushi** to focus attention on this form of violence against women. We would like to explore the actual mechanisms whereby this neglect and maltreatment is meted out to women. We want to study the variations of neglect among different castes, classes, communities. Some of us have already begun work in this area. Those of you who would like to help us in this exploration, please write and tell us so that we can discuss with you how to go about it together.*