

Beginning of a New Dawn...!

Redefining those 5 days



Narratives of the individuals with their identity declaration has been produced following due ethical procedure and has been obtained from them with their informed consent.

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Supported by-

Water Aid, India

Printed At-

Intecard, Bhubaneswar

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Year of Publication 2015

PREFACE

Menstruation is one of the primary biological processes of woman. It is part of the periodic physiological preparation towards child bearing that happens with a woman. It is not there right from the birth, but sets in around the start of the teen ages. As there is the underlying impact of sex hormones there is of course a perceptible change in the psychological and physical state of the person. So, if we speak in a matter of fact way, nutrition, balanced food, general cleanliness, hygiene, happy and peaceful mental state and proper rest should be the order of the day, during this time for the individual. But our sociological structures are so cunningly and subtly set that these straight forward needs are replaced with deprivation. All of these start with the unfounded notion of the menstrual blood being impure and the woman in an impure bodily state. This must have originated eons ago. Over the ages of group, community, society establishment some unquestioned practices have come to stay that are termed as culture, tradition, religion etc. which have brazen gender control and deprivation rules towards women.

Some of the rules like stepping over a broom or a stray bone will make a lady barren later or touching a live plant will make it wilt and die are the examples of absurd imagination gone wild. But it holds and practiced diligently!!! Another set of insidious rules are kept firm through the invocation of the wrath of a supreme being and the fear of unknown, like if you look at the male member of your family during this period they will be heaped with untold sufferings. And coincidences do happen or any incident can be twisted to fit in to a treacherous rule fixated by a gullible mind. This is how a simple girl was psychologically hounded for years just because her going out of house during menstruation was linked to her father's death. Illiteracy, poverty and closed community living also compound the situation to no ends. Someone is threatened of excommunication from the community; other is in fear of losing her family livelihood.

The list extends to the horizon and beyond ...But this is not the place for recounting all those, rather we bring forward the dividends reaped in small amounts through the community based efforts in educating the young girls and women on menstrual hygiene and management. The effort is quite graded and starts with a scientific or rational explanation of the reproductive system and process to girls that are in the educational setups. Then the discourse covers health and hygiene part and finally the myth is busted of the cultural, traditional and religious practices. This process is expanded to the girls groups, women SHGs, older women community and specifically into families of girls and women with disability.

Everyone understands and accepts the science, so the initial hurdle is crossed. The young girls are ready to make the change at least at their personal level. Some of course has become the torch bearer in their community for this effort. But the elders and older one cannot rationalize themselves out of the veritable traditional and cultural quagmire. For the meek and shy the experiment of "touch the plant and it does not die" is like a "eureka" moment - the fallibility of the so called cardinal rules.

Also it is seen that personal hygiene practices are liberally adopted by the mothers and daughters are allowed to use clean cotton clothes or sanitary napkins as per their means of living. But disposal is still hounded by another obnoxious rule and it will take some structured thinking to overcome it. Until then they will be polluting the water resources, by burying the disposed materials in it.

One must admit that a generation of aware individuals has been created who are willing to incorporate rational and scientific menstrual hygiene management in to their lives and also make others aware of it. Another really heartening point to note is that all those girls or women with disability who are in need of constant or additional support during this period are now better supported by the care givers. Besides, many of the rules of social isolation go for a toss for them.

In some situation practicality demands that rules be bend or waived, like, when the daughter is solely in charge of cooking and other members are to go out for daily labour for a living they cannot afford to stay starved for the entire duration of menstruation.

But the best thing is that the aware generation is also finding their own way out of such situation by thinking through, arguing it out or simply raising high their courage to defy the rules. To avoid bathing in the mid of night if menstruation occurs, the mother of a girl with disability, insist her daughter to stay put till morning. That way she can avoid complicating her daughter's fragile health. At the other end a girl just feigns nothing has happened in similar situation. And in the morning everyone goes for bathing so she also goes...

This statement probably sums the understanding and independence achieved by an educated young woman after getting associated with the process - It (menstruation) is absolutely my personal concern and now that I know the why of it, I need not fear and declare about it but simply practice the hygienic management. This leaves me free to pursue my interest and do what I like. I will carry this learning forward to the younger ones. Someday not very far into the future relating to menstruation only the rational practices will be followed and all stigma and absurd rules will no more exist.

Let the fact rule over the myths forever...!



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THE RUB OFF EFFECT OF CBR AND THE WISE MOTHER

Badakodanda village in the Bhanjanagar block of Ganjam district is a very big habitation which is home to people from different castes. The concrete roads are a contribution of the sadak yojanas of the state and has made the village cleaner and more navigable.

Tucked in one corner of the big village is the hamlet of the potters. Anita's father Sibaram Behera is a potter. He has a big wheel and lots of pots and pans made of mud as one enters the house. It's a house with two families, Anita's and her uncle's. Part of the house is made up of mud walls and a thatched roof and the centre has a concrete structure with tiny rooms barely enough for Anita to move.

A grown up girl today, she is eighteen and was born with cerebral palsy. When Minati, the worker from Aaina met her for the first time, Anita was completely on the bed and even movements were a far cry. It has been the tremendous patience of her mother and her CBR worker, which helps Anita live with greater dignity today.




Anita's mother confessed that she also believed before she had been to Aaina's training on menstruation and menstrual hygiene, that women must obey rules of commensality, and not inter mingle with others and live as a social group during those days. All girls in my family, she said laughing, now have been relaxed rules. Not just Anita, the rules for my younger daughter has been relaxed too. There was a time, before this training that the girls stayed closed in a room for 3 days. We did not allow them to touch anybody, and it was felt that with their touch the other person would be contaminated. But today we just follow one rule. We do not enter the puja room on those days as our touch would be polluting for God. That's sacrosanct.

Last time we were there, intervened Jyoshna why did she shout suddenly realizing that she has her period, telling her brother to move out of her way. Oh, said the mother, because she did not want her touch to contaminate the boy. But you just said that you do not practice this anymore. No we are not rigid about it today, but the first time before the girl takes her purifying bath, we do not touch or let others touch us. Now you see I have taught this to Anita so many years back, that today these basic rules are difficult to change, though yes I do realize that there is no pollution in my touch. It is years of a belief system and you want us to change it over night. It's difficult. Probably if I was a young girl, I might have been influenced, but you see now it's difficult.

Now what happened traditionally to some extent is still continued, but we have made important departures from the tradition, by relaxing many rules. Just to mention one, when the girl menstruates for the first time we continue to keep her confined in a room and after the period there is a ritual and the whole village is invited for a feast. In those days in the course of her period we were very strict with the rules. But in the subsequent periods that followed as a result of an improved understanding, due to the visit of Aaina staff and the trainings we attended, girls after the first bath can freely go out and mingle with others without any restrictions.

Is it not possible that you can relax these rules further? Yes it is. It will slowly happen. You should have seen when we were children says Jhunu mother of Anita, things were so different. You would be scared if you hear it all ! Now that we learn it, we will



certainly not be so rigid with the generations to come. My grandmother did not even allow us to touch a broom and we had to sit confined in a corner and we were so scared that something bad would happen if we touch even by mistake. But now we understand and we do sometimes touch and don't feel guilty about it any longer.

For a change, when Anita keeps trying to wake me up in the middle of the night saying she is bleeding, I encourage her to sleep and wait till dawn. I am no more so rigid about bathing immediately. I understand now, just that it is a habit so I am unable to give it up fully. I am reassured to hear that none of you take your bath in the middle of the night after a period, though we had been told that there was nothing to fear in our training, but I still nursed a fear. You see if Anita bathes in the middle of the night, she might catch a cold and get fever and as she is a girl with disability, the fever makes the situation worse.

What do you use? Do you use the sanitary napkin or cloth? I use the cloth and I was taught about hygiene in the training. I prefer cloth, because I had never used a napkin before and further it is not always available in the village. But just as trained after use, I wash them properly and then dry them in the sun to disinfect them and store them in a box.

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IT IS ONLY TIME, BECAUSE THE TREE DID NOT DIE!!!

Pujalaxmi Gouda is an 11 year old girl in the village of Jhadabhumi, daughter of Golap and Daka Gouda. The Goudas are cow herders by caste profession and the family has ten pairs of cattle. The father is the milk supplier of the vicinity and tends to the animals with care, supported by the entire family. The last house in the corner of the village, they have ample space in their backyards to keep the cattle, which is their livelihood. Tiny in her features, barely three and a half feet tall, Pooja's mother moans that the entire family though cattle rich, has no consumption of milk or milk products.

A student of Class VI, Pooja told us about the training she had attended in the town of Belanguntha in Ganjam district. She started menstruating less than a year back. She said that the training that she had attended was about menstrual hygiene. She very excitedly said that the didis in the training encouraged us to touch a plant and see the result during



our period. So, even with her mother's strictures not to touch a tree or plant, for it will die she had tried quietly touching the lemon tree and the cashew tree in the vicinity of her house and none of the trees died, Did you tell your mother, what happened? No. but I was happy with the result and knew it to be superstition .

They told us also about cleanliness. It is important that when I am menstruating that I must remain clean. Now I am very particular, I make sure I remain clean and bath everyday during those days.

What are the practices that you have traditionally been following during your period? Golap, the mother of Pujalaxmi emphasized on touch. The most important thing that needs to be followed during that period is touch. We must not touch anybody and nobody should touch us. We must not enter the kitchen or worship the gods. Usually after our husbands have eaten, we eat the leftovers, but not during our period. Our husband is also equivalent to god and just like gods offerings, we must not touch his offerings. Otherwise he will be contaminated. My mother in law taught me this, so I had been following this for years, but I don't think I will do it with my daughter, so strictly.

What are the rules that you still insist with your daughter? Well I am not so strict anymore, as a result of your training I have understood that touch may not be so defiling, but I still insist that she sleep on a separate mat and keep a little away from the rest of us and not touch the rest. It's after she has bathed and her clothes have been sent to the washer man, do we consider her touch less impure.


But Pujalaxmi, you attended training where you were also taught about the touch of a woman not being polluting. Why have you not protested to your mother's rules and restrictions? She is a child and we would not accept what she says, even though she has

learnt it in the training. You see it is difficult for us to believe these new things that all of you share. We have traditionally been obeying a set of rules; further we are milk men by caste and have lots of ritual obligations. Thus for us to break rules might mean being excommunicated and losing our caste sanctity, so it is not so simple, as you think.

The first time that little Pujalaxmi had her period, the barbers wife saw her bleeding and told her to call her mother. When Golap the mother arrived, she helped Pujalaxmi clean herself and provided her with a protective cloth and immediately got busy cooking to organize the village feast. Her daughter had matured and the village had to be invited. For seven days she sat in a corner and she was surrounded by the other girls who were her friends from the village. We sat and talked, but they did not touch me, nor did I touch them.

What would happen if you touched, Pujalaxmi. The person would be touched, "Chuan". Ok, but what happens if somebody gets "Chuan". Pujalaxmi smiled sheepishly and said, my mother says strictly no. I have tried to tell her, but she just refuses to communicate on this. Have your lady teachers in school told you about this. No. Further all the teachers are men and so there is no discussion about all this in school. It is strictly private and we do not share with anybody in school that we are menstruating.

What do you use now as protection? I use sanitary napkins now. My mother gets them for me from the BDpur market or occasionally if not available here, from the nearby town, Jagannath Prasad. Where do you dispose off the sanitary napkin? I bury it in the vicinity of the pond! As a result of my training I started using the napkin and I prefer it over the cloth any day. I had to wash the cloth and I used to hate the stench and could not eat after that. Do you realize Pujalaxmi that you are contaminating the water by burying the



sanitary napkin in the vicinity of the pond; and then you drink and bathe with the same water. Why can't you burn it? I want to, but my mother says that half burnt, it can be picked up by animals and then they would drink my blood and I would not be able to have children !

Little Pujalaxmi, barely eleven has to maintain precautions, as otherwise her mother warns she will not have children.

Golap has to say, that it is because Pujalaxmi is very fond of sweets, she bleeds for 7 days and runs out of packets of expensive sanitary napkins. Though later Golap agreed that she knows that eating sweets may not be the cause for long bleeding, as she had herself suffered almost three years of intermittent bleeding, even through she never had fondness for sweets.

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THE RULES GO FOR A TOSS HERE

Jagyaseni proudly proclaims her name. Her smile and her joyous appearance belie the severe trials and tribulations in this young girl's life. She has always been most unwanted in the family for her mental retardation. Learning from her mother, who often says, why don't you die, she asks me in the middle of our conversation, as to why she did not die. She says that she is a burden to the family and wishes she could die. Oh you see, I am brainless, so I cannot understand or remember anything, she says with a sheepish smile. She is called "Bayani" the mad woman in the village.

On being asked who named her Jagyaseni, she says it's her uncle (her aunt's husband). We met Jagyaseni in her neighbour's house in the village of Boripadar. On hearing us arrive, she came out of her house holding her paternal grandmother's hand. She greeted us with a happy smile and said that she had been waiting.

She sat on the wooden bed in the middle of her neighbor and friend Sandhya's house. Her grandmother looked unhappy and said, she can't do anything, it is for us to look after her, or she will die. It is better she dies, before we are dead.




How old are you? I don't know, she says. Do you go to school? No, I go nowhere. I just stay at home. I cannot even help my mother, as I do not know how to cook. Grandma agreed that Jagyaseni was no use and kept moaning. But surely she gets a disability pension. Yes she does. She gets Rs 300 per month and 10 kgs of rice.

Jagyaseni is aware of her periodic cycle. She has not attended the training, but on her behalf her guardian, her mother and her grandmother, were trained on menstrual hygiene by the CBR worker from Aaina, during their regular visits. It is the mother who takes care of the girl, who is about 22 years old. When she has her period, it is the mother who changes her sanitary cloth and cleans her. But Jagyaseni clarified that she was able to communicate to her mother to do the needful.

What do you use as a protection when she has her periods? We use clean cloth. Previously we were not so particular of what material we are using, but when we were strictly advised to use only clean and soft cloth during her period we are following that. After the period, we wash the cloth with detergent and dry it in the sun. We then store it in a box. How frequently do you change the sanitary cloth? Her sanitary cloth has to be changed very frequently (once in every hour) which is done by her mother and her





grandmother. Though Jagyaseni does not bleed much, but as advised by the CBR worker, her cloth is changed very frequently as she is not always able to wear it correctly.

As far as the traditional rules of women during the periodic cycle is concerned, the family has relaxed the rules to a large extent. Her grandmother shared that she is never kept isolated, nor do we completely stop her from touching anything, as we know that she is unable to understand. As a result of the exposure provided through the menstrual hygiene program, the family feels more comfortable relaxing traditional rules for a woman whose disability makes observance a practical difficulty.

Jagyaseni is unable to even understand when she starts bleeding and thus it is a role that her mother and grandmother have to play. On detecting the beginning of the cycle, they ensure her cleanliness as they now understand that hygiene is an important component of menstrual health.

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THE KITCHEN AND THE POOJA ROOM - THE LAST BASTION TO CONQUER

Narmada lives in the village of Mangalpur along with her family, consisting of an old grandmother, a mother and a brother. A very poor family, Narmada recently lost her father who had renounced the house and the family several decades back to become an ascetic. Narmada today lives with the stigma of her father's death. 15 year old girl is constantly blamed by the grandmother, that her father died as Narmada had gone to school and had suddenly started bleeding as a result of her period and had stained her clothes. In the vicinity people, particularly men had seen her bleeding, and this was to the grandmother an evil omen. Narmada lives in constant fear of her grandmother, as the lady gets into a vitriolic diatribe against young Narmada, whenever she sees her.

She left school under pressure as the family was too poor and when she failed in her matriculation exam she was forced to discontinue.

She knows Aaina as the organization which works with young girls in rural set ups against superstition. The first time they attended training in the Belaguntha



block of Ganjam district and they were taught about menstrual hygiene, the biological reasons behind it, the superstitions associated with it, and were encouraged to challenge them. Narmada recalls how she came back home feeling extremely happy, as she had been forced to live under the allegation of being her father's killer, because of her menstruation. But she also recollects how she was dismissed by both her mother and grandmother, as having new fangled ideas. She went back for a second round of training and discussion with the project staff and demonstrated to her family through a tree experiment. She had been warned that anything she touches would be polluted and die. So she demonstrated to her mother, who was forced to accept the result grudgingly. Today she finds herself in a much more comfortable position within the family, as she is able to counter her grandmother's allegations with logic. But she is still unable to cook and go to the Puja room during "those days".

Narmada's mother admits that much of her understanding on traditional practices associated with menstruation was imparted to her by her mother and mother in law. They said that the dirt in the body was being drained out and thus it was best to avoid even touching other people who would then be contaminated by the dirt. But she confessed that she had never really tried to analyse and find out more and it is only when her daughter attended the training on menstrual hygiene and educated her, she realises that many of her practices are too rigid.

But then why still the restrictions about entering the kitchen. It's my mother in law. She says that she wears a sacred thread and will not eat food cooked by a menstruating woman. She refuses to change inspite of all logic, saying, I am too old and don't want to change anything now. You are all welcome to eat and live as you please, but please do not try to convince me.

Narmada recalls the first time she had her period in school, and was sent home by her girl friends and her teachers. On reaching home, she was told by her grandmother, that she was not to leave the house after this, as she was an adult girl now. She also remembers that she was not given any food and was kept isolated. She had to eat one meal a day and could not even ask for a second help. Even her mother was disallowed from seeing her and the aunts would give her food, sitting in a corner practically not even allowed to move. For seven days she was not even allowed to bathe. The sanitary cloth she was using was preserved for seven days and then it was taken by her aunts and buried near the pond. She was told that if she breaks the rules, then it would be harmful for her brother. Today Narmada is able to laugh about those days and call it a bad dream.

She wears a soft cloth as protection. She used to dispose them off by burying them in the pond. Are you aware of the contamination that this will cause of the water? But Narmada explains that they were not allowed to burn it or throw it, as it was said that she will then not have children. But after the training she has switched to sanitary napkins and discards her napkins by burning them.

But things are a lot different now, and there are no restrictions of going out, or touch and isolation anymore. She is a happier person today.

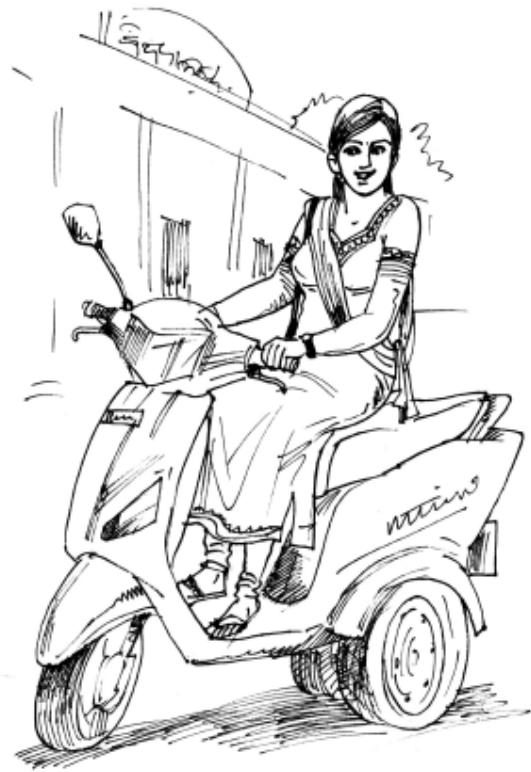


YOU CANNOT HOLD ME BACK - I AM RASHMITA!

Rashmita is a 22 year old young girl from the village of Baruda. Baruda is 12 kms from Bhanjanagar town, the sub divisional headquarters in Ganjam district. She lives with her mother in the village, as her brothers and father work in far off Surat, in Gujarat.

She has overcome the barriers of her gender and disability and is now training for CT to be a school teacher. Rashmita drives a mechanized two wheeler adopted to her problem with her legs. (She has Polio) it has been donated by the Rajiv Gandhi foundation, accessed through Aaina. She is extremely comfortable in her vehicle and drives with confidence. Rashmita reminds one of the advertisements of motorized ads... why should boys have all the fun !!

Rashmita and her friend Rinky Dalbehera had attended the training on menstrual hygiene organized by Aaina. She says they learnt about the importance of hygiene, the use of sanitary napkins and the need for nutritious food when menstruating. She emphasized on fruits and



vegetables and foodstuffs which have vitamins as an important supplement for women, during those days. Today Rashmita understands that much of the food that she had been restricted from eating before was based on no logic and was mere superstition, like not eating non vegetarian food. She says I eat everything now.

Some of the major changes that have happened in Rashmita's life post her training are the behavior pattern that she had to adopt during her periodic cycle. The most important being the isolation. She was not allowed to leave the house, she was made to sleep alone in a sack or a mat at best, she was advised not to touch others, not to wear new clothes and not to eat the night meal, and her clothes were given to the washer man, in line with the ritual cleaning of stained clothes. These are things of the past now. Rashmita has been successfully able to convince her mother, that these practices are superstitions and must be discarded with time. But there are certain things which have not changed. She is still not allowed to cook. She is not allowed to enter the puja room. She says that she continues to struggle with her family on these, but not always successfully.

Rashmita feels that one of the most important things that she has gained in the training is the understanding that this bleeding cycle that a woman goes through every month is a biological process of the human body and must not be associated with anything ritual or religious. This has gone a long way in removing the fears associated with breaking these social taboos. The isolation we felt in the past during those days when we were not even allowed to mingle with our friends, made us hate and dread those days and our period. I have now also managed to convince some of my friends about this being completely biological with no religious connotations and thus no fear of godly reprisal, as we had been taught by our mothers. Initially some of the girls whom I tried to convince were not ready to accept the explanations, but many of them have come around today, seeing me as an example. Between my friend Rinki and me we have become champions of this cause in our village and with our friends.

We used cloth in the past, and were not very particular how we cleaned the cloth. Now we prefer sanitary napkins. But even if we use cloth, we are much more careful about cleaning it, disinfecting it before reusing it. And as far as disposal is concerned we no more throw it in the water. We wash the sanitary napkin!!, then cover it in paper and dispose it in the garbage area or burn it. But why do you wash a sanitary napkin. Because there is a belief that if our blood is touched by any animal, after we have disposed our sanitary napkins, we will be childless.

She feels one of the best ways to spread menstrual hygiene is also through the promotion of sanitary napkins. Many girls even if they want to, are unable to use them, as they are too expensive. Pads if available for Rs 5 - 10 will be more accessible for economically poor girls in villages.

Rashmita also realizes that superstition has to be countered through education. She says you can see a visible change in attitude of educated people as against illiterate people. They used to say that a menstruating woman must not see an infant, or the infant will have dysentery. Now we understand that these are myths and must not be encouraged at all. We strongly repudiate such statements in our village today.

Rashmita a future school teacher feels that she has a very important role in educating children about hygiene. A large number of girl children says she, drop out of school because they feel sick in those days and there is no provision for changing napkins, as there are no girls washrooms in schools. She feels the best way to encourage female education is to have girls toilets, lady teachers who will be sensitive to these needs of girls, and will discuss them with young girls from Std VI onwards, to remove their fears.



SERVICE AT THE HOME; MELTING DOWN TRADITION

Sandhya Rani is a girl with mental retardation of 16 year age in the village of Boripadar. Her father a very loving guardian of his teenage daughter shared sadly that he had taken his little daughter to Ranchi mental hospital and several other places, but to no avail. And finally the family has accepted her mental disability with patience.

Sandhya's menstrual hygiene is very well taken care of by her mother Pramila Jena. It is the CBR (Community Based Rehabilitation) workers attached with Sandhya who have been constantly advising Sandhya's family on menstrual hygiene and practices associated with it, along with other things. It is difficult for Sandhya or her mother to travel outside and attend formal training, so the project has lightened the burden of the young girl and her family by providing her home based care.

Sandhya does not have to face any restrictions when she is menstruating, nowadays. The family because of her disability and past exposure and discussions with the CBR workers have understood the futility of practices like isolating the young girl, depriving her of food, not allowing her to touch, afraid of pollution, etc. The family shared how these restrictions are today things of the past and not just for Sandhya Rani but also for the other daughters of the family.



In case of hygiene, it is her mother who takes care of the young girl, who has no understanding of the whole process and is even unable to report the same to her mother. She shared with us that the dates of her periodic cycle are very timely making the work of the mother much easier. She also shared that during those days, she does not even go out to work and takes responsibility of caring for her child.

She uses a cloth and as advised by the workers a clean cloth, which she regularly washes and then dries in the sun and then stacks in a box for next use. But the family has been, considering the need for greater hygiene and contemplating shifting to sanitary napkins.

Before the support of the staff of Aaina project began, unable to cope with things like her menstrual hygiene and care, the family was even strongly contemplating leaving the daughter in a home for special children. But as a result of the training and hands down support provided by the project CBR staff, the family finds it far more manageable to take care of her during her period.

But the family still feels that menstruation for a girl like Sandhya Rani who will probably never marry and get into child birth is a burden on her and also on the family. But they also shared that they do not want to endanger the life of the child by attempting to remove her uterus and are thus happy that they are today better equipped to take care of Sandhya's needs as a woman.

Saraswati Nayak lives in the village known as Jilliva Colony in Belaguntha block of Ganjam district. The village, Jilliva Colony is an inhabitation of the SC community, as segregation of caste in habitation is strictly followed even now in most parts of the state. The people of the village can be classified as landless (a few families who have land, it is less than an acre) and are mostly dependent on daily labour for a living. They also break stones to create metal chips which they trade in exchange for other commodities. Surrounded by forests the hills are abundant with stone, with which these communities carve their living.



THE STRUGGLE AGAINST MUMBO JUMBO, POVERTY AND IGNORANCE

Saraswati is a shy girl, about 16 years of age, always dressed in a saree, unlike girls of her age. She says Rajalaxmi didi from Aaina had organised training and all the adolescent girls from their village had attended the training.

She is happy that she now knows that when her back and stomach hurt as a result of her period, it is nothing to do with any sins she has committed for which she was born a woman and has to suffer this. Now she knows that all she needs is a pain killing medicine to lessen the pain. I am poor says, Saraswati, so are all of us in the village, so we cannot afford sanitary napkins and use soft cloth instead. We were taught in the training to which Rajalaxmi didi - who is a regular visitor to our village - took us, about several things associated with our menstruation. We now understand that we don't need to be isolated when we are bleeding as our mother's have done, and it is also not true that if we young girls when menstruating look at an infant, the infant will fall sick and will have diarrhea and dysentery. Do you now know the real reason of diarrhea and dysentery? Yes we do, but our mothers are still not convinced and are unhappy if we look at infants, even today, in spite of our best efforts. Similarly we also have been told that we must not touch anyone and cover our faces with a veil and slip of quietly, lest anyone sees us, during our period. We are also not allowed to cook, nor go to the temple.




Why are you still not allowed to cook. You see, it's my father, he is a very traditional and well educated man and thus very strict about the rules of tradition. But surely if he is an educated man he should understand all this is superstition!

The women of Jilliva Colony though feel that, these modern girls obey no rules, and thus while the mothers may have asked the girls to obey these traditions, but clandestinely the girls do everything, as they do not accept these traditional ideas and are further encouraged by trainings of the sort. Saraswati's mother interjects to say it's not about anything else, it's about Mahaprabhu, God who resides in the puja room of the house. He will be polluted by such a touch. Saraswati says my mother is right. A terrible incident did happen. After the training, I was a little emboldened and touched the utensils used for Mahaprabhu, and you will not believe it, but that night, our house caught fire. But did that happen because you touched or because of some other accident. How can you call it an accident? Every day we cook inside the house and nothing happens, but on that fateful day a flame escaped from the hearth and set the whole thatched house on fire!

Saraswati lived in hatred of herself with the thought that she had angered god so much that he had been forced to create havoc in the house, and was deeply angered with her actions. Fair amount of convincing about gods benevolence and this being a superstition has finally convinced Saraswati that her house was not burnt, because of her actions, but by mere accident, which had nothing remotely to do with her.

Saraswati recalls the first time she had her period. The first instruction she laughs and recalls was, "do not look at any man". That night her mother made her sit in a corner of the house and she was worshipped like a goddess. Her mother combed her hair with scented oil and decorated her with flowers. And then she also arranged for some rice and made sweetmeats, which was distributed



to all the villagers. I was very happy with all the celebrations. But I was sad that I could not even see the TV. I was not allowed to see men, and there would be men in the village, as everybody watches TV together, so I was not allowed that. I could not bathe for those days and had to wear the same saree through out. At the end of the seven days, all the village women took me to the village pond and bathed me. And I was again beautified and then taken to the temple, where I prayed and then the second round of village feasting began. My mother made sweetmeats again and they were distributed among all my friends and villagers. And then I wore new clothes and prostrated in front of all the village elders. Everybody blessed me and gave me some money as a gift.

The most important thing that we had learnt in the training is regular cleanliness and change of cloth every 6 hours and disposal in a proper place. We are aware of many hygiene practices now, thanks to our training and exposure, but we still often have to abide by tradition, as we can't fight the whole village.

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NECESSITY IS THE WAY TO RELAXATION

Sarita Nayak is also from the village of Jilliva Colony, in Belaguntha block of Ganjam district. Just like her friend Saraswati, she is also a Dalit, and lives in the same hamlet. Dressed in a saree of her mother, 14 year old Sarita looks rather awkward and uncomfortable wrapping it around her small body.

She also attended the training on Menstrual Hygiene organized by Aaina. Sarita dropped out of Class V, because of the poverty at home. Currently she is the lady who runs the house, so that the others in the family, her parents and her brother can go out as daily labour and earn some money. They are agri labourers and do NREGS work in the summer season. She cooks and looks after the younger siblings. She is sending the younger siblings to school.

She learnt about menstrual hygiene. She also learnt about sanitary practices, when they go defecating outside. The need to wear slippers to prevent worms, the need to wash hands regularly and particularly after defecation, were the things we were taught.

We now also realised the importance of changing sanitary cloth every 6 hours and keeping ourselves clean. We also bathe every day and after washing the sanitary cloth we now do not dry it on the ground, but hang it on a clothesline.

Sarita says she cooks unlike the menstruating girls in other families in her village. Why is this so? This is because there are no gods residing in our house, she says, they live in the village house at Jilia, and we live here just as a nuclear family, because of

paucity of work in the ancestral village, we migrated here. So we don't need to follow restrictions like the other families, who are the original inhabitants.

The problem with all this, little Sarita says, is that you train us, but when we come home with our new found knowledge, our families are not convinced. And not all of us are able to convince our mothers. I did tell my mother, about what I learnt, and she was quite upset. She said that these are traditional rules and we have obeyed them for years, and how was she such a little girl asking questions about these ancient practices. Even now when we get up in the morning said her mother, we first change our clothes, before we start cooking. Cooking and food cannot be contaminated, her mother protests, says Sarita... so while she cooks, because of the influence of the training, her mother allows it only because there are no gods in the house and she has to go out and earn a living. But she is certainly not happy or convinced with these new fangled ideas.

On the mothers being challenged about these practices, the young girls were very happy and asked the Aaina project staff to question their mothers, as to the reasons for their superstition. The training has certainly helped us. Today we no longer live in isolation and we are also not restricted from going out, or our touch and look is not considered contaminating for men and other villagers.

Jilliva Colony is steeped with illiteracy and superstition. Though the adolescent girls have been trained on menstrual hygiene, but it is very difficult for them to practice what they learnt, as there is too much resistance from the older generation which is totally unread and steeped in religious and patriarchal values.

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IT IS PERSONAL, YOUR RULES I HARDLY CARE

Sunita Gouda is from the village of Jhadabhumi. She is 17 years old and has been associated with Aaina's menstrual hygiene program for a few years now. She had been to Chennai with the Aaina team to see how low cost sanitary napkins are made. How is it viable in the market and how the hygiene factors are taken into consideration when preparing the napkins? Aaina is looking at the possibility of low cost units and girls like Sunita taking up the leadership in the village level in setting up the linkages.

Sunita has studied up to class 9th and discontinued her studies, because of financial problems in the family. And currently after learning tailoring, she is a seamstress in the village.

Sunita now recalls that the loneliest and humiliating periods of her life, before her understanding and education on women's periodic cycle organized by Aaina, was during the segregation that she faced every month. The segregation was complete. She was not allowed to eat with the others, particularly the men in the family, she had to sleep alone in a mat or even a sack. She was




not allowed to wear clean clothes. She was not allowed to go to school, or any place outside the house. We were not allowed to eat a full meal and were kept hungry.

The most important change that has happened today is the recognition by these young girls, that all the taboos are based on superstition, they have nothing to do with any logic and the people propagating the beliefs themselves if questioned about the reason, could not answer, beyond saying that they followed their families tradition and never questioned it. So now even if Sunita is prevented from doing things, she feels no qualms in disobeying the rules of tradition associated with the menstrual cycle. She says we were not given clean clothes, now even if we are not given, we just take it ourselves, as we realize that what we are doing is correct. Similarly we also go out now, and we are touching everybody.

It is not that everybody in the family just accepted this change overnight. Resistance came from the whole family, particularly the mother. Sunita then decided to take her mother along for one of the discussion sessions. She realized that when she heard it from so many people, she would be more convinced than just hearing it from her. The expected change occurred and Sunita's mother is far less rigid about practices today. But she continues with a few things like bathing immediately after the period, even if it was in the dead of a winter night. Sunita added in a whisper, with a smile.. of course I do not bathe, because I never confess that I had my period in the middle of the night. So only when the sun rises and I am comfortable, I bathe.

She said that the bathroom is close to the coconut tree in their house. So she was asked not to bathe in the bathroom during her period, as the coconut tree would die. But Sunita says, now I understand and I retort back, saying I am still waiting for the tree to die.



Sunita has also started performing the role of an educator in the village. She has been trying to convince the other girls in the village about these practices. She says, not that they accept everything I say. But sometimes they do. Like they are afraid of touching anybody, as they have been told then the person will have a sudden death, if they do. She assures them that no such thing will happen. Similarly they do not eat full meals thinking their abdomen would hurt more, again she reassures them, that they should eat healthy.

She feels that there is so much dignity in her present life. She does not have to announce to the whole world that she is menstruating. Previously when she was isolated and made to wear dirty clothes, it was like announcing to the whole family, of her period. Similarly when she was not allowed to attend public functions, the whole village knew. Sunita laughs and says, now even if they don't take me to a marriage, if I am bleeding, I just go myself. As I know I have nothing to fear. If my menstrual blood is dirty, then when we are child bearing, it's the same blood, is it not. Then why is the child not considered impure or dirty.

Today Sunita is much more liberated and lives with less fear and more confidence. She feels with time, these practices are bound to be challenged more and will ultimately disappear.



