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Historical Changes in *Masik Dharma* Practice in Sanatani Young Female: A Study of Sajanpur, Jhapa

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Abstract

This study examines how young Hindu women in the Sajanpur Municipality, Jhapa, Nepal, between the ages of 17 and 24, are changing their attitudes and behaviors about menstrual taboos. Historically, taboos that have their roots in Hindu traditions consider Masik Dharma to be impure and impose restrictions, including being excluded from temples, kitchens, and social gatherings. But these ideas are changing as a result of globalization, urbanization, education, and modernization. The research used a mixed-method anthropological approach that included questionnaires, focus groups, and interviews with 30 participants, showing that many young women are increasingly rejecting stigmatization, openly discussing Masik Dharma, and adopting modern hygiene practices, even though some taboos still exist for the sake of maintaining family harmony. This shift is facilitated by the media, peer networks, and maternal influence, which promote cultural negotiation between tradition and modernity. Results show that Masik Dharma, which was formerly taboo, is now being discussed openly, suggesting a larger shift in culture.

Introduction

In a woman's body, *Masik Dharma* is akin to housecleaning. It is a normal process that all women experience. *Masik Dharma*, also known as "Menustration" in English and Ritu Shrab in Sanskrit, is a Hindu concept that literally means "monthly duty" (Shaw, 2023). *Masik Dharma* has a complicated and changing cultural context in Nepal. In this context, the social interpretation of *Masik Dharma* is impurity, and women are not permitted to remain in the family during their menstrual cycle (Thapa & Aro, 2021). They are exiled to live in sheds known as Chhaupadi in rural Western regions of the nation (Joshi, 2022). According to Merskin (1999), *Masik Dharma* is considered a taboo that women and girls must conceal in order to avoid embarrassment and shame. During *Masik Dharma*, over 89 percent of Nepali women experience some form of limitation and seclusion (Kadariya & Aro, 2015). Despite the fact that these customs have persisted for centuries, modernization, education, and awareness-raising campaigns are posing a threat to them.

For young women in Nepal, *Masik Dharma* is a difficult and complicated journey because of taboos and social stigma (Thapa and

Aro, 2021). *Masik Dharma* is viewed as impure by traditional beliefs, which result in destructive practices and social exclusion (Douglas, 1996). Confusion and an inability to effectively manage periods can result from a lack of trustworthy information and services. As they mature, girls find it difficult to strike a balance between their own aspirations and their understanding of *Masik Dharma* rights. This has changed thanks to the availability of facilities for menstrual hygiene and menstrual products, which offer a forum for open and sincere conversations about *Masik Dharma* (Ferguson, Pradhan, & Upadhyaya, 2024).

Masik Dharma's evolving landscape is complicated, particularly for young women who must choose between inherited beliefs and candid communication (Thapa and Aro, 2021). Although education is an effective means of transforming values, it is not able to change values in this particular area. This study focuses on the main variables influencing young women in the Sajanpur Municipality of the Jhapa district's perceptions and behaviors related to menstrual taboos.

The main objectives of the study are to analyze the changes in perception and practices of menstrual taboos among young women, compared to their initial experiences, and to identify the key factors contributing to the observed changes in perception and practices of menstrual taboos among Sanatani young females.

Literature Review

The idea of "patriarchal mythos," which Mary Daly defines as the common and sneaky myths that uphold and legitimize male power, is one of her central ideas. According to Daly, these myths have a significant influence on society's attitudes toward women and their bodies because they are ingrained in religious and cultural practices (Daly, 1978). She highlights how important it is for women to take back control of their own stories and write fresh, empowering ones.

These taboos are frequently the result of patriarchal views that consider *Masik Dharma* to be dirty or disgusting. But there has been a noticeable shift in menstrual behaviors and attitudes in recent years, especially for young women. This change is a component of a larger effort to debunk and demolish patriarchal narratives.

The process through which cultural components—such as ideas, values, beliefs, habits, practices, and symbols—spread around the world and promote wider interactions between cultures is known as "cultural globalization" (Appadurai, 1996). Modern communication technologies, the internet, media, travel, and international trade have all contributed to this issue by facilitating cross-cultural and national interactions, information sharing, and influence (Gunaratne, 2003).

Through the support of cross-border exchanges of ideas, values, and knowledge, cultural globalization has a profound impact on the evolving attitudes and behaviors around *Masik Dharma* taboos. Social media, the internet, and other digital platforms have made it easier for people to learn about *Masik Dharma* health and rights around the world. Through this exposure, people from many cultural backgrounds can learn about more progressive, scientifically verified, and alternative perspectives on *Masik Dharma*, which challenge traditional beliefs and lessen stigma. *Masik Dharma* is shown more openly in global media representations, such as films, TV series, and commercials, normalizing the topic and promoting previously taboo conversations.

Research in Nepal indicates that younger generations, particularly urban and educated women, are questioning and modifying traditional menstrual restrictions (Acharya & Malla, 2024). Higher education levels and media exposure have played a crucial role in reshaping perceptions, enabling

women to challenge stigmatization and exclusion (Parajuli, Poudel, & Shrestha, 2017). Studies also highlight the role of globalization in introducing alternative perspectives, promoting menstrual health awareness, and reducing the rigid enforcement of traditional practices (Raut et al., 2019).

Methodology

This study focuses on the experiences of young, unmarried Sanatani females aged 17–24 in Wards No. 9 and 10 of Sajanpur Municipality. Sajanpur Municipality is located in Jhapa, Nepal, and shares a border with India. As the district headquarters, the municipality represents a setting where traditional cultural beliefs coexist with increasing urban influence and cross-border interaction. The study adopts a qualitative anthropological approach based on fieldwork conducted in the selected wards.

Fieldwork involved direct engagement with participants in their households and community settings. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to explore participants' perceptions, beliefs, and practices related to *Masik Dharma*. These methods allowed participants to share their experiences and perspectives in an open and interactive environment. A structured questionnaire was used as a supplementary tool to collect basic demographic information and to identify general patterns related to menstrual practices.

The study employed a harvative research design and purposive sampling to select 30 participants, with 15 participants from each ward, drawn from 27 households. Participants were selected based on specific criteria, including age (17–24 years), marital status (unmarried), and religious background (Sanatani). This sampling strategy enabled the inclusion of participants from diverse social and educational backgrounds in order to capture a range of experiences related to *Masik Dharma*.

The collected data from interviews, focus group discussions, and questionnaires were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis began with careful transcription and repeated reading of the data to gain familiarity with participants' responses. Key statements and recurring ideas were coded and organized into categories. These categories were further examined to identify broader themes reflecting common experiences, beliefs, and practices related to *Masik Dharma*. Through this process, themes such as the influence of education, family traditions, and access to hygienic menstrual products emerged, indicating gradual changes in attitudes toward *Masik Dharma* among young women in Sajanpur Municipality.

Findings

Menstrual taboos, deeply rooted in historical and religious beliefs, have long been part of Hindu cultural life. Although *Masik Dharma* is a natural biological process, it becomes a culturally shaped biological phenomenon shaped by social norms and religious interpretations. In many Sanatani communities, *Masik Dharma* is interpreted through the lens of ritual purity and pollution, a concept anthropologists such as Mary Douglas have explored in their work on symbolic boundaries (Douglas, 1966). In the Hindu worldview, *Masik Dharma* is often seen as a period when a woman is temporarily *ashuddha* (impure), requiring her to avoid activities such as entering temples, cooking food for others, or touching sacred objects. These practices, passed down for generations, were once accepted with little questioning. A 20-year-old informant, currently pursuing her bachelor's degree, explained that during *Masik Dharma,* she was traditionally instructed by her grandmother not to enter the kitchen or touch jars of pickles. Such instructions were followed almost instinctively and

formed part of the rhythm of everyday family life. The finding suggests that *Masik Dharma* is an enculturized experience, where young women learn menstrual meanings and restrictions through family teachings, religious beliefs, and everyday social interactions rather than through biological understanding alone (Buckley & Gottlieb, 1988).

However, she also reflected that these practices are increasingly being questioned among younger generations. With greater access to education, urban lifestyles, and exposure to global media, many young women are beginning to discuss and reconsider these customs rather than following them unquestioningly.

The young women, aged 17 to 24, held a variety of menstrual-related beliefs and engaged in a range of menstrual-related actions. Some talked about being told not to participate in family prayers or being sent to sleep in another part of the room. Forms of isolation during *Masik Dharma*, such as avoiding religious spaces or limiting social interaction, reflect the continuing influence of traditional beliefs that associate *Masik Dharma* with impurity and separation from sacred or communal activities (Bennett, 1983).

Others joked that they no longer fear supernatural consequences for openly violating these norms. When I was small, my grandmother warned me that touching my younger brother while I was menstruating would bring misfortune to him. I now give him a daily hug. A 21-year-old participant replied, in a tone of both anger and laughter, "Noting. happens. (a long tone)." The range of opinions indicates a shift in thinking: taboos are not disappearing entirely, but they are losing their unquestioned authority.

Communication is one of the most visible indicators of change. *Masik Dharma* was whispered about, if at all, in previous generations. Phrases like *para sarey* (meaning "Time of isolation has come") and *nachhune vaye* (meaning "I became untouchable") were frequently used. Behind closed doors, older sisters and aunts gave helpful guidance. Many young women today are confident talking to friends and relatives about their periods. 18-year-old informant said confidently, "I can discuss this topic with my male friends comfortably, even though they are more interested and curious about *Masik Dharma* ". Online platforms have played an essential role in this transformation. Young women are now able to ask for help, discuss their experiences, and counter myths in social media groups, YouTube videos, and health websites.

In one case, a participant described how she learned about menstrual cups through Instagram and convinced two of her friends to try them, something that would have been almost unimaginable a decade ago "I saw a heroine advertising menstrual cup in Instagram, I felt curious and ordered it online. It was comfortable to use so I decided to share it with my friends and they used it and loved it". These digital spaces allow for privacy, diverse opinions, and validation of personal experiences, something traditional family structures rarely provide. While a minority of participants still expressed discomfort with public discussions, the fact that such conversations now exist openly is itself a remarkable change.

The sources of menstrual knowledge have also diversified. Mothers remain important teachers; besides that, their role is now shared with schools, the internet, and peer groups. Many participants reported that their mothers gave them their first practical advice on using cloth pads and washing and drying them privately. A 19-year-old participant remembered, "I was introduced to sanitary pads by my classmate when I was in grade 10, before that I used to use Suti ko Sari (cotton cloths)". However, they ended up seeking out additional in-depth information from online sites or school

health lectures. “My mother told me not to go to the temple, but my teacher explained that *Masik Dharma* is natural and not dirty,” recalled a 19-year-old participant. Because my teacher provided a scientific explanation, I have greater faith in her.

Still, change is not uniform. Some participants maintain certain restrictions for the sake of societal respect or family harmony, even if they disagree with them. “I don’t think I’m impure, but I still avoid the temple during my period because my grandmother gets upset if I go,” one young female explained. This supports an anthropological argument frequently made in research on cultural continuity: customs can endure because they sustain social unity and relationships rather than out of fear of divine judgment (Goody, 2000). In this way, adhering to *Masik Dharma* taboos becomes more about cultural diplomacy within families than it is about religious theology.

Mothers play a crucial role. Almost all participants cited their mother as their primary source of information about *Masik Dharma*. The way information about reproductive health frequently flows through endogenous kinship lines is reflected in this maternal role (Seymour, 1999). However, these discussions differ significantly in terms of both attitude and subject. Certain mothers unquestioningly pass down restrictions based solely on tradition. Others encourage their daughters to prioritize comfort and cleanliness above rituals. This shows “cultural negotiation,” in which women choose which aspects of tradition to keep and which to abandon in accordance with their personal beliefs and experiences.

Media exposure has also altered the cultural narrative of *Masik Dharma*. Television advertisements now feature girls playing sports and attending school during their periods, challenging the image of *Masik Dharma* as a time of seclusion. “My mother used to impose restrictions, and I followed them the same way in the beginning. Later, as I continued my studies, understood TV advertisements and researched on the internet, I realized that all of this is just superstition. So, I stopped following those restrictions. Now, even at home, they say there’s no need for restrictions. Change is happening gradually.” These portrayals influence attitudes, especially among urban youth, even as some older viewers dismiss them as inappropriate. From an anthropological perspective, this represents globalization introducing new cultural scripts that are adapted, resisted, or embraced depending on local values.

The improved understanding of *Masik Dharma* among the young women in this study demonstrates the combined effect of education, urban living, and media exposure. Many participants framed *Masik Dharma* as a natural process rather than a source of shame, and several advocated for better access to menstrual hygiene products and more open discussions in schools and communities. Still, diversity of opinion remains. A participant said, “It is for our own good as we can get rest for some days every month”. Several view certain taboos as beneficial, a chance to rest and be cared for, while others reject them as restrictive and outdated. A 24-year-old participant proudly said, “I do enter the pooja room, visit temple, and receive tika. Menstrual taboos are made just to humiliate women.”

In the end, *Masik Dharma* provides an angle through which one can witness cultural transformation. It shows how people balance their own personal beliefs with their inherited ideas and how traditions change in response to the demands of globalization, modernization, and individual agency. The determination of certain traditions indicates that, despite societal change and scientific advancement, cultural identity is still a powerful force. At the same time, young Hindu women’s increasing transparency predicts a period when *Masik Dharma* will be less stigmatized and better

understood.

As anthropologists tell us, cultural change is rarely about the full erasure of tradition. Instead, it is a process of reinterpretation in which the past and present meet to create new meanings. In this case, the reinterpretation of *Masik Dharma* is unfolding in ways that both honor family values and embrace the possibilities of individual choice and bodily autonomy.

Discussion

Findings show that young Hindu women in *Sajanpur* are developing a complex view of *Masik Dharma* by balancing tradition and their personal choice. *Masik Dharma* was taught as a time of impurity in childhood, but participants are increasingly challenging or reinterpreting these limitations, putting comfort, hygiene, and family ties above strict ritual practice. Anthropologists can interpret this openness as a change in "discourse of the body," which is a significant cultural shift (Scheper-Hughes & Lock, 1987). Access to modern information and products enables young women to express bodily autonomy, and open discussions with friends, family, and online groups show that *Masik Dharma* stigma is decreasing. Yet, some practices persist, not from belief in impurity, but to maintain family harmony, showing that tradition endures through social negotiation rather than unquestioned authority. Overall, *Masik Dharma* has become a site where inherited norms, individual agency, and modern knowledge intersect, reflecting gradual but meaningful cultural change. These correspond with the more general anthropological finding: as young people look to various sources of authority in modernizing societies, the elders' monopoly over cultural knowledge is eroding (Lancy, 2015).

There are certain similarities between my research on young Hindu women in *Sajanpur* and recent studies on Nepal, but my data also adds significant complexity to the picture. According to recent surveys, younger, urban, educated women in Nepal are rapidly changing their attitudes and habits towards *Masik Dharma*, even though taboos around it are still strong (Mukharjee, et al., 2020)

A crosssectional study found that a large majority of participants avoided praying during *Masik Dharma* (83.1%), and many still observed traditional restrictions such as avoiding cooking, abstaining from eating with family, or purifying household spaces after *Masik Dharma*. (Mukharjee, et al., 2020).

This indicates how cultural and religious taboos surrounding *Masik Dharma* still exist in Nepal's cities. This is proven by my findings, which show that some of my participants continue to follow specific guidelines, particularly when residing with elderly relatives.

The concept of purity and pollution developed by Mary Douglas helps explain the cultural logic behind menstrual restrictions. Douglas argues that societies use ideas of ritual purity and impurity to maintain symbolic boundaries and social order. In many Hindu communities, *Masik Dharma* has traditionally been categorized as a state of ritual impurity, leading to restrictions on entering temples, cooking food, or participating in religious activities (Douglas, 1996).

However, my qualitative data highlights a generational shift: many young women no longer accept taboos unquestioningly. Instead, they reinterpret or disregard them, often for reasons of personal comfort, hygiene, or social relationships. This reflects what the literature describes as heterogeneity in menstrual practices depending on education, socioeconomic status, and exposure to modern sources of information (Mukharjee, et al., 2020).

Similarly, the research on menstrual hygiene management practices among adolescent

girls: a cross-sectional study conducted in Nepal revealed that urban adolescent girls reported significantly higher knowledge and better menstrual hygiene practices than rural ones. (Mukharjee, et al., 2020). This is consistent with what my participants reported: having access to *Masik Dharma* cups, reusable pads, or disposable pads, as well as making thoughtful hygiene product choices. These are signs of bodily autonomy and a shift in priorities from tradition to comfort, convenience, and health. Additionally, recent reviews demonstrate how menstrual hygiene is still hampered by established stigma, ignorance, and poor infrastructure, which has a negative effect on girls' education, dignity, and psychosocial well-being (Dhital, 2025). My findings partially support these worries: while many participants are moving towards better practices and open communication, some continue to uphold taboos, frequently as a result of societal or familial pressure or out of respect for elders rather than personal conviction. This implies that stigma is being negotiated and, in certain situations, repackaged as social respect rather than completely vanishing.

The gradual shifts observed in menstrual practices can also be understood through practice theory, particularly the concept of habitus developed by Pierre Bourdieu. According to Bourdieu, everyday practices are shaped by deeply internalized dispositions that individuals acquire through socialization within their cultural environment (Bourdieu, 1997). Menstrual restrictions may therefore persist not only because of explicit beliefs but also because they are embedded in routine social practices transmitted across generations. Even when young women express more progressive attitudes toward *Masik Dharma*, they may still follow certain practices due to social expectations and family influence.

Another recent campus-based study found that while almost all female students were aware of *Masik Dharma* and hygiene, many still skipped classes during their periods due to discomfort, fear of leaks, or a lack of sanitary materials, and quite a few continued to adhere to menstrual restrictions (Ghimire, 2023). This is consistent with my findings that change is uneven: practical limitations such as family views and product access still matter, and not all young women feel equally empowered to reject taboos.

From a psychological perspective, the persistence of menstrual stigma can also be interpreted through the ideas of Sigmund Freud regarding unconscious beliefs and the internalization of cultural norms. Freud's theory suggests that early socialization plays a crucial role in shaping individual attitudes and emotional responses (Freud, 1923). In the context of *Masik Dharma*, girls often learn from childhood that *Masik Dharma* should be hidden or treated as shameful, which can lead to deeply internalized feelings of embarrassment or secrecy. However, increasing exposure to education, media, and health awareness programs may gradually reshape these internalized beliefs, contributing to the changing attitudes observed among younger women in this study.

What can we learn from this synthesis? First, this study adds qualitative depth. While cross-sectional studies and large-scale surveys give information on the number of people who stick to limitations, they rarely capture the reasons behind their adoption or rejection. I saw compromise, confusion, and selective enforcement procedures through interviews. This "in-between" region, which is neither complete acceptance nor complete rejection, represents a period of cultural transformation. Second, the interaction of factors including education, media, and hygiene product accessibility, urban setting, and family structure emphasizes that *Masik Dharma* change is both structural and individual.

Lastly, this research suggests that the *Masik Dharma* experiences of Sanatani young females in

Nepal are changing into a hybrid menstrual culture that incorporates modern cleanliness, individual agency, and open conversation while drawing from tradition out of respect or family peace. This hybridization suggests that *Masik Dharma* may become more usual in the future through adaptation and reinterpretation rather than open rejection of culture.

Conclusion

Menstrual taboos are increasingly being reduced or eliminated in modern society. This is due to the importance of breaking down barriers to support education, health, and gender equality. Disposable pads remain the most popular menstrual hygiene product, but reusable alternatives are being adopted. The past decade has seen improvements in the accessibility of menstrual hygiene products. The community advocates for open discussions, better access to hygiene products, and the relaxation or elimination of restrictive practices. Education, advocacy, cultural changes, and easier availability of *Masik Dharma* supplies are contributing to a change in practices, challenging long-held notions and constrictive customs. Spiritual orators, like Bhagvat Bachika Jaya Kishori Ji, emphasize that *Masik Dharma* is a natural biological process and should not be treated as taboo.

The article highlights the growing shift in menstrual taboos among young women, influenced by socio-demographic variables, family and peer influences, and activism. Urban and economically empowered women exhibit more progressive attitudes, while family and peer influences encourage open discussions. Feminism and globalization have accelerated this change, promoting a holistic understanding of *Masik Dharma* across generations and cultural boundaries. Many young women now feel empowered to participate in rituals during their menstrual cycle, breaking traditional prohibitions. However, some women still follow traditional practices due to deeply rooted cultural habits, reflecting underlying patriarchal beliefs.

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