

Publication

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Period Poverty and the Intersections of Religion, Patriarchy, and Violence in South Asia

I was first made aware of the topic of sexism in South Asia in the spring of 2024, when I had the chance to visit and teach at a non-profit school in Bangalore, India, where children from very poor socioeconomic sections are afforded a new life where they get shelter, food and world class education. My mother, raised in Punjab on the Indian-Pakistani border, gave me a detailed insight into the deep-rooted culture attributed to women in South Asia, specifically the taboos and shame surrounding the topic of menstruation. I developed a passion to investigate the background and reasoning of why this “menstrual shaming” is tolerated and has become normalized, and took initiative.

I visited three schools – a boarding non-profit, a public school, and a private school – and collected information while also holding interactive workshops that discussed self-hygiene and confidence. I spoke with hundreds of girls, recording detailed experiences with each, but I returned with many unanswered questions.

South Asia, specifically Pakistan and India, is known to be predominantly patriarchal, with religious and cultural influence dictating women's lives. Both countries face enormous social, economic, and health challenges, including pervasive inequality, violence, and political instability. Both India and Pakistan share long histories, with a common colonial past, and share common involvement in sexism. The need to specify women's rights as a subcategory of human rights from a gender perspective arises from the fact that women, over the years, have been subordinated and considered inferior to men. Human rights are fundamental, basic rights that exist from the day a human is born to their death. Without these rights, existence and survival are at stake. These rights are attributed to them irrespective of place of birth, place of living, religion, class, ideology, sex, or any other factor. ("What Are Human Rights"1).

The concept of Patriarchy is central to an understanding of society. Sylvia Walby's argument about the existence of six patriarchal structures that restrict women and maintain male domination will continue to limit women's freedom and chances in life compared to men. *Paid work*, commonly known as the gender wage gap and the glass ceiling; *household production* where the livelihood of women are centered around housework; *culture* which reinforces gender norms; *sexuality* which expects and holds different sexual behaviors and expectations between men and women; *violence* where men control and dominate women through physical force, and *the state* that plays a

dominant role is defined these six patriarchal theories. (Thompson 1). Both Pakistan and India are patriarchal through the state, with theories from law-givers and politicians throughout history. However, they differ in fluidity. While India's rigid boundary of patriarchy seems to become more fluid as women are becoming more expressive and aware of their rights, Pakistan still denies women the right to express themselves due to the extreme conservatism and narrow-mindedness of society and leadership. (Gupta 80).

The influence of women being viewed as inferior and even beginning to believe themselves can be rooted in generational curses. A generational curse describes the cumulative effect on a person of things that their ancestors did, felt, or practised in the past, and a consequence of an ancestor's actions, beliefs, and sins being passed down. (Makashinyi 1). The amalgamation of religious and cultural effects on women over the years is presented as a curse. This includes dowry violence, honour killings, female infanticide, and *sati*, a practice where widows are burnt alive on pyre of their deceased husbands. The Hindu practice of *Sati* has been a source of criticism from the Western world for centuries. For instance, during India's period under British rule, *Sati* was condemned as an uncivil practice. Men have glorified *Sati* as a courageous act. The manifestation of an "ideal woman" has been shaped by Manu's philosophy. This Hindu law-giver posited that this woman is submissive, sacrificing, subservient to men, and

serves her husband similar to how she would worship God. Scholars have argued that South Asian women so internalize this notion that it manifests itself in their voluntary acceptance of abuse. (Syed 51).

Quandeel Baloch has been a case that has been used in various human rights trials as well as arguments surrounding violence against women in Islamic communities. Baloch was a social media presence who criticized the Islamic clerics in Pakistan and the double standards of women's sexuality. Her opinions were described as vulgar, and she received backlash. At the age of 26, in July 2016, she was suffocated to death by her brother as an honor killing, the intentional killing of females for violating socially held ideas of honour. Her brother, Waseem, would receive comments from other men degrading Baloch: "Your sister is singing and dancing in her knickers and you're living a luxurious life with the money she earns," one man told Waseem. "You have no ghairat (honour)." Violent and disturbing comments were left under posts: "If I find this woman alone, I would kill her right on the spot and would hide her haram (forbidden) body," one comment on Facebook read. Her brother told journalists that the justification for her murder was that she was making her family's life difficult. In 2019, Waseem was convicted to 25 years in prison after reactions globally arguing that this could neither be a cultural or religious justification, but a breach of human rights. Many in Pakistan

believed Waseem's actions were justified, while others spoke out bravely, arguing that he had acted solely due to others' judgment and societal pressure. (Sanam Maher 1).

The customary thought of sexes being attributed to roles since birth has been reflected through the discrimination and violence towards women. The birth of a boy is celebrated, whereas the birth of a girl is not welcomed. In some rural regions of India, the rate of infanticide and abortion is high. Sex selection is rampant all over the country, where women are forced to abort female fetuses due to cultural norms. (Niaz, Hassan 1). Journalist and filmmaker Amitabh Parashar created the documentary *The Midwife's Confession*, containing three decades' worth of confessions of midwives who ended the lives of newborn girls. The women narrated how they killed the newborns, sometimes stuffing their mouths with salt or strangling them. This stems from the reasoning that by sacrificing a daughter, a son will be guaranteed in the subsequent pregnancy. Since girls are considered a burden due to dowries and the idea that they cannot provide, female infanticide continues to run rampant in India. (Kumar 1).

The philosophical point of religion dates back to ancient Greece. Still, the feminist philosophy of religion is a more modern development in Western societies, posing questions surrounding the role of women in religion. South Asia is made up of multiple religions, the most prevalent being Hinduism and Islam.

In Hinduism, women were revered initially as Goddesses and held in the highest esteem. Hinduism was never a specific code of practice, but a plethora of different people accepted into the religion to learn and worship. The divine in Hinduism included the worship of both female and male idols, where Goddesses were as strong as Gods, and had the same respect. Throughout history, this has changed due to multiple factors, and now women are seen as submissive and sometimes even demonic.

Women's lives become defined by their traditional role as a wife and mother, devoid of all personal ideology. Their bodies, once a symbol of holiness, are now taboo. The integration has seeped into the population so deeply that extremes such as child marriage and *Sati* became normalized. (Pallpothu 1). A multitude of myths related to menstruation have come from the manipulation of religion. The origin of menstruation being dirty and even dreaded as being poisonous dates back to the Vedic times, to Indra's slaying of Vritras, a dragon like demon who happened to be a brahmana descendant. To redeem himself, Indra distributed his guilt among earth, water, trees and yes, women. This distribution is believed to be the origin of menstruation in women, with the monthly cycle considered a consequence of the shared sin. Further relating to the Hindu faith, women are prohibited from speaking about their menstrual cycle or participating in everyday life. Restrictions, including not entering kitchens,

temples, touching holy books, offering prayers, and sometimes even touching others, have been implemented. (Garg, Anaud 1).

Islam has different branches of the religion as well as separate texts; however, muslim culture considers all to echo and reinforce each other. The Qur'an is seen as the words of God that have not been altered and have stood the test of time. As Islam spread through South Asia, extremes expanded as well. The verse in the Qur'an that refers to the creation of humans states that man and woman were created from one individual and became pairs that spread across the earth. The specific word was *zawj*, meaning pair or husband. Traditionalists interpreted it as husband, while others argued that humankind was created from a single entity that was genderless. Arguments globally have sparked the notion that verses are genderless or interchangeable, and scholars have deemed the translation that gives men the power incorrect and that it would be up to Allah, since Islam is based on the foundation of non-violence, but rather ultimate faith. (Tasmin 21-24). Because of this uncertainty, as well as specific laws, muslim women have differing opinions on feminism and primarily stick to traditional roles due to interwoven culture. Though the Qu'ran itself views menstruation as a natural and even holy practice, from quotes of Hazrat Aisha, the wife of the holy prophet, south asian muslims adhere to cultural practices. (Hameed 1). In Islam, menstruating women cannot fast or enter temples due to the excretion. But in South Asian culture,

menstruating women cannot even touch prayer mats, share bedding or utensils, participate in social gatherings, or talk to other men. (Ahmad 1).

This systemic subhumanization of women in South Asia can be applied to Johan Galtung's theory of violence. The pyramid of violence – structural, cultural, and direct – all take part in the created cultural norms for women that derive from their biology. Galtung defines structural violence as hard that is embedded within social structures and prevents humanity from achieving full potential. Cultural violence is beliefs, traditions, and ideologies that justify or normalize violence, and direct violence is the form of physical violence. Violence is often seen as a physical act, but in this case, it adheres to all three. The structural violence against women in South Asia is passed on and can be explained in the theory of a slow pot of boiling water. At first, the water temperature is lukewarm, until it continues to heat up, and you find yourself in boiling water. Like the life of women, it is a slow but powerful manner to strip them of all potential since birth. The cultural violence is loud, and contributes to the psychological harm or violence that lives inside of them.

Women do not have the comfort to speak openly about many of the stigmatizations in their lives. (Galtung 3-15). Lastly, direct violence is justified through honor killings, and punishment such as *Chhaupadi* – the forced practice of sending menstruating women

out of their homes, making them live in huts, the street, or the forest, which has led to countless deaths. (Takuri et [al.](#)1). Galtung explains that violence exists when human potential is hindered. Women in South Asia face this due to their biology and are often denied dignity, health, education, and freedom, reinforcing patriarchal control.

Nature Vs. Nurture has been a long-standing debate in psychology concerning the relative importance of an individual's innate qualities versus personal experience in determining individual differences in physical and behavioral traits. (McLeod 1). In the case of the enforced patriarchal system on women, this is an abuse of their biological factors, implemented by the influence of external factors after conception. Since the day a girl is born, they are charged with who they will be and are systemically taught that they are subhuman through the stigmatization of biological factors and the inadequacy they feel from a young age.

The three schools I visited had clear examples of what it would mean to nurture these girls from a young age properly. Ankur, the non-profit boarding school I taught at, had provided children from slums or extremely rural parts of Karnataka with education, food, a safe place to live, a voice, and most importantly, fostering a sense of potential. The difference was vast between those who had grown up in Ankur and those who had grown up with their family and attended a public school.

I talked to five girls between the ages of 12 and 14 privately, asking them questions and vice versa. None of them knew the scientific reason behind menstruation, while half of them thought they were dying when they first menstruated. All five girls told me that when they started menstruating, they had to go through another woman in their family, such as their grandmother, who would then tell their mother. Afterwards, they were required to spend 14 days to a month alone in a dark room, with no stimulation, no school attendance, and no interaction with others. They didn't understand why they had to do this, but they accepted it because of the wiring; bleeding meant there was something wrong with them.

After they first menstruated, they explained that their lives were not the same. Instead of playing and learning, they reported feeling less confident, playful, and happy. Their lives at home were confined to cooking and cleaning, and if they did play, they could not play or talk to boys.

Out of the numerous factors contributing to menstrual stigma, one lasting effect is recognized. The dehumanization of women continues to infest their abilities to reach their full potential. This analysis delves into theories that surround this stigma. As a person with a South Asian background, I have firsthand seen how damaging these stigmas are and how they participate in more than just a lack of autonomy, but also

manifest into violence. I recognize my privilege to have access to knowledge of my independence as well as the ability to identify what is justified and not, but the billions of uncounted women do not. This stigma will continue to be prevalent and dangerous. In my hope, this analysis will raise awareness and give a voice to those who are voiceless.

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