

Can Comics Help in Busting Menstrual Taboos?

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Abstract

The paper looks at the significance of comics in busting menstrual taboos, creating menstrual awareness and in initiating period conversations. This is explicated through a study of Menstrupedia Comic, an Indian comic on menstruation, developed by Aditi Gupta and Tuhin Paul. The necessity and significance of Menstrupedia is brought out through a discussion on the grim 'menstrual situation' and the presence of shocking beliefs and practices with regard to menstruation, particularly in the Indian context. A review of studies carried out in this field, statistical data and reports of studies sponsored by various organizations shed light on the contemporary level of menstrual taboo, awareness and hygiene. The persistence of menstrual etiquette also restricts the conversations and dialogues surrounding menstruation. All these point to the necessity of healthy menstrual dialogues and in spreading period positivity. A discussion of menstruation, a topic that is either deemed as too trivial for discussion or tabooed off as something to be hushed about, through the medium of comics helps in deconstructing the social myths surrounding this normal bodily event. Comics, given their multi-modality, visual spectacle and lucid narrative style, prove to be highly effective in dealing with such topics and in reaching out to a wider audience. Menstrupedia, with its accurate scientific knowledge and graphic portrayal effectively deconstructs the patriarchal perception of menstruation and shatters the silence surrounding periods. With fun and play, it disseminates scientific facts of the menstrual cycle and teaches young girls on healthy practices in relation to menstruation.

Keywords: Comics, Menstruation, Menstrual Dialogues, Period-Positivity, Taboo

Introduction

"Bholi, a 12 year old girl from the Dindori district in Madhya Pradesh was playing in the backyard of her house when she got her first period. Horrified at the sight of blood, she ran to her mother. Pulling her outside the house, her mother gave her some hay to absorb the blood and told her that she would have to spend the next five days in the shed where the family buffaloes lived. Confused, Bholi cried at first, but soon realized that her mother and sisters did the same every month as it was an essential part of 'becoming a woman'. She quietly retreated to a corner of the shed where she ate and slept with the animals, smeared in dung, dust, and blood for the next five days. Three months later, Bholi picked up hay as usual to manage her period, not noticing an insect in the hay. Soon after, she experienced severe stomach pain, which continued even after her menstrual cycle had ended. When the pain became unbearable, she was finally taken to a doctor. But the insect, which had entered through her vagina, had severely infected her uterus, and removing it was the only option. Bholi would never bear a child in her life." (USAID, Kiawah Trust and Dasra 2014)

“Kala was 11 when she had her first menstrual period. She was at home preparing for her final exams and panicked when she found herself bleeding.

“My first reaction was to panic,” recalled Kala (name changed to protect identity), a college student in southern Tamil Nadu’s Coimbatore district. “I thought I had contracted some serious illness and I was going to die. What would happen to my exams? Should I ask my father to take me to the doctor?” Kala had called out to her mother in panic.

“My mother did not come,” Kala said. Instead, the old woman who lived next door did. “After bustling about and getting me to bathe, she took me to a room near the cowshed, asked me to sit on a wooden plank, which had already been prepared for me and asked me not to move from there,” she said.

Kala was given some food and water and left alone. It was evening before she saw her mother.

“Instead of comforting me and taking me home, my mother told me that I was a big girl now and that I should stop playing with children in the neighbourhood,” she said.” (TNUSSP 2019)

The above given menstrual narratives are just representative of what thousands of girls go through every month. Despite twenty-first century’s proud claims of astonishing progress in various fields, the monthly menstrual experience is often seen as shameful and embarrassing by many, a secret to be hushed and whispered, never to be spoken about openly. The sudden sight of blood on the event of menarche still evokes fear and buying menstrual products still requires discretion. From wrapping one’s monthly purchase of sanitary napkin packets at the ladies’ store to storing it away from everyone’s gaze back home, menstruation continues to be stigmatized. While things have certainly changed and improved, there is yet a long way to go. Millions of women live in that socially constructed “menstrual closet” (Young 2005:111) having been conditioned to keep mum about their menstrual experiences and discomforts, and having internalized the shame, silence and disgust surrounding menstruation. Many still feel uneasy and perturbed when they hear ‘periods’ in public and even those men and women who agree on menstruation as a topic worthy of serious discussion diligently abide by the various do’s and don’ts of the menstrual etiquette.

Do Menstrual Taboos Still Exist?

Given the culture of shame and silence surrounding menstruation, its perception as a taboo topic and lack of proper knowledge and not to mention the host of myths surrounding this normal bodily event, most girls lack a dignified menstrual experience. For many, menstruation seems to be clouded in restrictions and taboos with no accurate scientific knowledge and proper awareness of menstrual hygiene management. From the time girls get their menarche, they are fed on a host of cultural and social messages, patriarchal restrictions and ‘gendered’ expectations. Often adolescent girls have incomplete and inaccurate information about menstrual physiology and hygiene. This is no surprise since girls are rarely informed about menstruation unless they experience it for the first time. Most often mothers, friends, teachers, relatives or television are the primary sources of information on menstruation to adolescent girls (Sultan and Sahu 2017). Chandra-Mouli and Patel (2020) point out that “girls in many low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) enter puberty with knowledge gaps and misconceptions about menstruation unprepared to cope with it and unsure of when and where to seek help” (610). There are over 355 million menstruating women and girls in India (USAID, Kiawah Trust and Dasra 2014:9), yet millions of women across the country still face significant barriers to a comfortable and dignified experience with respect to menstrual health (“Menstrual Health in India”). 71% of girls in India report having no knowledge of menstruation before their first period (USAID, Kiawah Trust and Dasra 2014:10) and the National Family Health Survey 2015-2016 estimates that of the 336 million menstruating women in India, only 121 million (roughly 36 percent) women use sanitary napkins (Upadhyay 2019). Regarding the perception of menstruation, 70% of mothers consider menstruation ‘dirty’, perpetuating a culture of shame and ignorance (USAID, Kiawah Trust and Dasra 2014:11). Consequently, for most girls, menarche turns out to be a scary experience, not because of going through the actual bodily process but because of the social meanings inscribed on the female body, particularly menstruation. Beauvoir summed this up rightly in her classic feminist text, *The Second Sex* (1949):

In a sexually equalitarian society, woman would regard menstruation simply as her special way of reaching adult life; the human body in both men and women has other more disagreeable needs to be taken care of, but they are easily adjusted to because, being common to all, they do not represent blemishes for anyone; the menses inspire horror in the adolescent girl because they throw her into an inferior and defective category. (qtd. in Young 2005: 97)

And more recently, perhaps Steinem was not entirely wrong when she penned down a list of ‘what might have happened’ had menstruation been a characteristic of the male body in her satirical piece “If Men Could Menstruate”. Hence a reflection on the “socially caused discomforts and oppressions associated with the experience of menstruation” requires serious deliberations on various crucial aspects, particularly “the shame associated with menstruation that compels girls and women to conceal their menstrual events, and the misfit between women and public places such as schools and workplaces, which often refuse to accommodate women’s social and physical needs” (Young 2005: 97-98).

In most parts of India, menstruation has not yet liberated itself from notions of impurity, stigma, embarrassment and restrictions. The supposed impurity of menstrual blood or the menstruating female body, menstrual misconceptions and myths, and social expectations of following menstrual norms weigh down heavily on the physical and psychological well-being of women. To understand and tackle the perception of menstruation in the Indian context, it is perhaps appropriate to reflect upon “traditional cultural constructions of the female body and the meanings of menstruation within Indian symbolic systems” which have no doubt influenced experiences and perception of female bodily processes (Chawla 1994). Accordingly, Janet Chawla makes a unique study on the Indian cultural meanings of menstruation and constructions of women’s body in her article titled “The Mythic Origins of the Menstrual Taboo in the Rig Veda.” Drawing on her study, Garg and Anand explicate the cultural dimensions of menstruation in the Indian context.

Culturally in many parts of India, menstruation is still considered to be dirty and impure. The origin of this myth dates back to the Vedic times and is often been linked to Indra’s slaying of Vritras. For, it has been declared in the Veda that guilt, of killing a brahmana-murder, appears every month as menstrual flow as women had taken upon themselves a part of Indra’s guilt. Further, in the Hindu faith, women are prohibited from participating in normal life while menstruating. She must be “purified” before she is allowed to return to her family and day to day chores of her life.

A study titled “Menstrual Hygiene Management among Adolescent Girls in India: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis” (2016) carried out by Anna Maria van Eijk and others identified restrictions in visiting places of worship, touching religious items or praying, restrictions related to food touching people, cooking, household work, exercise and playing, moving in and out of the house, and attending social functions, and sleeping or sitting separately from household members as some of the common restrictions experienced by girls while menstruating. Garg and Anand (2015) cite not being allowed to enter the pujaroom and kitchen during menstruation as the major restriction among urban and rural girls respectively. The beliefs of impurity associated with menstruation is one of the crucial underlying factors for such restrictions and myths. Studies on school absenteeism in relation to menstruation point out that one in four girls miss one or more school days during menstruation with the reasons for absence being physical discomfort, lack of water, hygiene and disposal facilities in school toilets, fear of staining their clothes and restrictions imposed by relatives or teachers (van Eijk et al. 2016). On the basis of their study and analysis, van Eijk and others arrived at the following estimates:

About half of Indian adolescent girls started menarche unaware of its cause, with only a quarter understanding the source of bleeding. The majority of girls faced numerous barriers and restrictions; only one in eight girls faced no restriction at all. Commercial pads were more commonly used in urban settings or schools, with girls in rural areas and in community-based

studies mainly dependent on cloths. About one in five girls disposed their soiled absorbents in inappropriate locations.

Similarly numerous studies have shed light on the unsatisfactory level of menstrual hygiene, particularly among adolescent girls, with regional and urban-rural disparities, mainly due to low literacy level, lack of proper awareness about menstruation, negative assumptions passed on from the elders (especially mothers), absence of menstrual hygiene related educational programs in schools, poverty and ignorance (Deshpande 2018, Mathiyalagen et al. 2017, Paria et al. 2014, Hema Priya et al. 2017).

Can Comics Help?

So when the situation is so grim, can comics help? Comics have always held a special place in the life of several avid readers and book enthusiasts of today. With a perfect blend of simple narratives and wonderful visual imagery, comics create a pleasurable reading experience. They have often been used to initiate children into the world of reading. Comic books, which grew out of the newspaper comic strips that gained popularity in the 1880s and 1890s, have existed in the United States since the 1920s (Carter 2009). Coming to the Indian scenario, India's largest selling comic book series and almost a "cultural phenomenon" (Alok Sharma), *Amar Chitra Katha*, was born in 1967, and 1981 saw the first appearance of the famous *Tinkle Magazine*. The comic book industry in India was at its peak in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Menon 2017). However, despite the popularity of comics, they were often relegated to a "second-class status" and considered as "childish" or "low-culture texts" seen as "something that can be used as a palliative for struggling readers" and definitely "not as text choices potentially appropriate for all readers" (Botzakis, Savitz and Low 2017:313). At times, they were regarded as fit only for children or a young audience and too trivial for serious contemplation. Of late, comics have acquired more significant dimensions with researchers and teachers discovering their "pedagogical potential" (Carter 2009) and the medium now being used to break taboos and encourage conversations on sensitive and rarely discussed topics. For instance, Madhavi Jadhav, a budding social entrepreneur from Satara founded *That Mate* which is a platform that provides

sex education to children in the district through comic books (Menezes 2019). As Bussert rightly opines, "Placed within the context of changing society, comic books and graphic novels entertain and educate, but they have also been instrumental in documenting and interpreting social, historical, and current events" (103). Besides, comic books and graphic novels "provide students of all ages with an ideal format for navigating wide ranges of literacies and modalities, and for taking an agential role in making meaning" (Botzakis, Savitz and Low 2017:310).

While breaking the ice and encouraging healthy conversations on topics not often spoken about is a complex issue, comics, with their ideal inclusion and combination of playful nature, visual spectacle, and lucid narrative style, can help a great deal. The question in this context is can comics help in busting the menstrual taboo? Can they take on menstrual myths and stigma and initiate constructive period conversations? And the answer is a straight forward 'yes'. Aditi Gupta and Tuhin Paul have proved that comics can do a lot in spreading menstrual awareness through *Menstrupedia Comic: A Friendly Guide To Periods For Girls*, the first Indian comic on periods. The book is available in multiple languages and has been included in the curriculum of several schools. The basic aim of the book is to educate girls on menstruation, to break the taboos surrounding this event, and to spread period-positivity. It aims to pull menstruation out of its closet and to encourage constructive menstrual dialogues. This is of great significance in a context where menstruation and menstrual practices are still clouded by taboos and socio-cultural restrictions resulting in adolescent girls remaining ignorant of the scientific facts and hygienic health practices with respect to this bodily event that is an integral part of their lives.

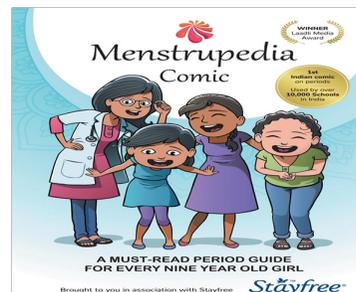


Figure 1: Courtesy: Menstrupedia

The creative genius behind the book, Aditi Gupta, realized the significance and the necessity of educating young girls on periods through her lack of adequate menstrual knowledge during her adolescence. When she got her menarche at the age of twelve, she was asked to keep it a secret, was forbidden from worshipping at her temple while she was menstruating, and used rags instead of proper sanitary products. She thus internalized a sense of shame and impurity associated with menstruation at a young age and experienced the detrimental effects of the same through her own experiences (Haynes 2016). The project actually began while Aditi and Tuhin were students at the National Institute of Design with the duo initially thinking of making a computer game or a board game and finally settling on using the medium of graphic narrative for spreading menstrual awareness. In 2012, they founded Menstrupedia, a platform for initiating constructive menstrual dialogues. A subsequent crowd funding campaign in 2013 enabled them to create the *Menstrupedia* Comic, a fascinating illustrated account of four girls as they learn about periods and other related factors. In a conversation with Shivani Bahukhandi (2017), Aditi Gupta points out that the twin prime objectives that they had in mind while creating educative material about menstruation was “(a) the elimination of the sense of shame by being period positive and (b) to help young people learn about menstruation on their own in a fun and interesting way.” This is exactly what the book does. The book addresses the worries and anxieties of every young girl who has just experienced or is going to experience menarche. Topics such as physical and emotional changes while growing up, healthy diet, menstrual cycle etc are explained by Priyadidi (Pinki’s elder sister and a doctor) to three young girls- Pinki, Jiya and Mira- as the girls gather at Pinki’s house to celebrate her ninth birthday. Each of the characters have been constructed and presented with utmost care so that they represent various sections of adolescent girls. For instance, Pinki has not yet had her menarche, Mira had her menarche on a day when the three headed out for a picnic by the riverside, and Jiya gets her first periods during the course of the story. Thus Mira has had her menstruation for some time, but is confused about it and is uncertain of the accuracy of the myths

and misconceptions surrounding it. Having come across the idea of menstruation as impure, she thinks of herself as impure while menstruating and keeps her menstrual status as a secret from her friends. Jiya has her menarche on the day of Pinki’s birthday. She suddenly discovers blood on her panties and is horrified, unaware of menstruation. Through Jiya, the creators of Menstrupedia capture the shock and fear of several adolescent girls who experience menarche without proper prior knowledge on menstruation. All the three are eager to know about menstruation and raise their doubts to Dr. Priya who provides comprehensive and scientific explanations to their genuine concerns. Thus each of these three characters stand as significant representatives of different sections of adolescent girls- girls who have not yet had their menarche and are eagerly waiting for it, girls who are unaware of menstruation and are scared on getting their first periods, and finally girls who have internalized menstrual myths and taboos.



Figure 2: Courtesy: Menstrupedia

The book has four major sections – “Growing Up,” “What are Periods?” “When is my Next Period?” and “Taking Care During Periods”. The first section includes physical changes in boys and girls during puberty, hormonal changes and explains what constitutes a healthy diet. The book then goes on to explain about periods and the changes that take place within a female body during the menstrual cycle, premenstrual syndrome, tips to relieve pain during pain, how to deal with premenstrual syndrome, tracking menstrual cycle and Menstrual Hygiene Management in a detailed and simplified manner. As

the medium of comics demand, it includes pictorial depictions and illustration explanations of how and why exactly does menstruation take place, yoga poses which help to relieve pain during periods, how to use a sanitary napkin, and how to dispose the used napkins.



Figure 3: Courtesy: Menstrupedia

The book drives home the idea that neither menstruation nor menstruating girls are impure and addresses certain myths such as those which prevent entering sacred places or touching pickle during period days. Consider, for example, the following conversation between Priya and Mira:

Mira: I have also been told not to worship or touch a sacred object or enter a sacred place, when I have my periods. Even touching pickle is forbidden! Are we impure during periods?

Priya: That's another myth. The process of menstruation is an essential and healthy body process and the menstrual fluid is just a harmless mixture of blood and tissue that wasn't used by the body. There is nothing impure about menstruation or menstrual fluid!

Mira: All of these months, I felt so uncomfortable with myself thinking that I am impure during my periods. But not anymore!

Priya: The more you know about your body, the more confident you will feel. (81-82)

The book thus promotes body positivity and period positivity and helps young girls to know and accept their body better. It also addresses various aspects of the female body which are not often discussed (with young girls) such as vaginal discharge, the processes that take place within a girl's body during the menstrual cycle, physical bodily changes that take place as girls grow up etc.

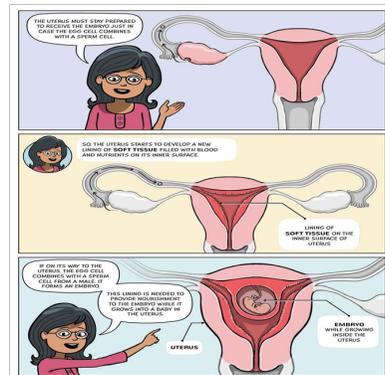


Figure 4: Courtesy: Menstrupedia

The book does have certain limitations and flaws. For instance, it does not make even a passing reference to menstrual products other than sanitary napkins. Besides, when Priya talks about unexpected period blood stains on one's dress, she mainly refers to ways of hiding it instead of pointing out that it is nothing to be ashamed about. However such flaws can easily be ignored when one considers the basic aim of the comic and the perception of menstruation in the Indian context. On the contrary, the text deserves appreciation for the innovative and playful manner in which it breaks down the taboo, making menstruation seem a more friendly-to-discuss topic for young girls. *Menstrupedia* deserves special mention for several aspects, especially for (a) the holistic and scientific approach it adopts in explaining puberty-related changes, especially menstruation (b) detailing the scientific facts behind menstrual cycle in a lucid manner (c) not reserving to euphemistic explanations or portrayal. [Often advertisements of sanitary napkins use blue liquid to represent or signify menstrual blood. The book does away with such representations and sticks on to realistic depictions.] (d) promoting an eco-friendly attitude. For instance, Priya advises the girls to keep used sanitary napkins away from pets and explains to them the proper manner of disposing them. Besides, the book includes certain hilarious incidents which convey certain relevant dos and don'ts with regard to menstrual products and also make the narrative interesting and funny. Aditi Gupta also opines that the book is 'culturally sensitive' so that parents would not hesitate to buy it for their children or would consider it as vulgar, particularly in the Indian context. In Aditi's own words:

Let's say we are talking about growing breasts, most books in the market about puberty are done by NGO's or foreign authors. Even if it is a cartoon-ish anatomy, if it is without clothes and there are two dots, symbolising the breasts, it indicates that it is a bare body. When we had to show the growth of breasts or widening of hips, we had shown it under clothes and not a body without clothes. As one starts to put a face to it, kids especially try to identify it with someone they know. There is a thin line between what our parents consider pornographic or objectionable and acceptable when talking about body parts. (Bahukhandi 2017)

Conclusion

One of the best ways to encourage menstrual conversations, debates and discussions is through art and literature. As Williams and Schneeman point out, "Art creates a socially acceptable (and approachable) way to bring up topics that might not otherwise be discussed. Art is a starting point for a larger discussion" (qtd. in Tabu 2017). Comics such as *Menstrupedia* spread menstrual awareness and encourage menstrual dialogues which is pertinent to destigmatize this normal biological process. *Menstrupedia* is not alone in its venture of shattering menstrual taboos with fun and play. Another such attempt is *The Mean Magenta*, a comic about menstruation, by Lily Williams and Karen Schneeman. Comics make the whole idea seem friendlier, easy to grasp and less embarrassing for those who have already internalized a shameful perception of menstruation. It plays a seminal role in educating girls about the scientific facts of menstruation, proper menstrual hygiene management, while simultaneously striving to erase the misconceptions and taboos that surround menstruation. "Coming out of the closet as menstruators" (Docherty 2010:12) is a process that requires appropriate knowledge of the female body, a scientific approach to the menstrual event and a complete acceptance of this bodily process along with innovative efforts that adopt a "whole-of-community approach that involves schools, health facilities, and homes and communities" (Chandra-Mouli and Patel 2020: 610). The underlying idea of

menstrual activism is that the female body cannot be problematized, oppressed, victimized or restricted for what it is nor can unique bodily experiences such as menstruation be tabooed or stigmatized. Initiating comprehensive period conversations also includes unearthing the links between menstruation and other factors such as gender equality, education, empowerment, and rights, gender friendly public and workspaces, and must also take into account the menstrual experiences of diverse sections of women and of other 'menstruators'.

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