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5

Menstruation Myths

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Introduction

Sudhir Kakar, the Indian psychoanalyst, argues that for the majority of Indian women female sexuality is 'a utilitarian affair', its primary value lying in 'its capacity to redress a lopsided distribution of power between the sexes' (1989:3). Since ancient times, however, that unequal distribution of power has been explained by the dominant (and predominantly male) ideology in terms of the inherent nature of women. This traditional view of women may be found encapsulated in myths and stories, or it may be confronted directly in treatises on the proper behaviour of men and women according to sacred norms (*dharma*). At its simplest, this view maintains that women are inherently wicked, that they are possessed of an uncontrollable and threatening inborn sexuality, and that they are innately impure.

I shall explore the link between notions of female sexuality and the idea of an inherent nature of women, within the narrower context of traditional Indian discourses on menstruation. First, I shall set the scene with a brief sketch of the debate on the inherent nature of women. I shall then relate two epic stories about female sexuality (one positive, one negative), and the dominant myth about the origins of menstruation. Finally, I shall look at the discourse on menstruation, and its implications for female sexuality, within three different indigenous frameworks. A reasonably objective, if not entirely accurate, account of

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menstruation may be found in the medical treatises of *āyurveda*, the 'science of life'. Revulsion for the female body is the keynote of the ascetic discourse, exemplified here by the debate on women in the texts of Jainism. The third framework is that provided by the religious ideology of orthodox Hinduism (that is, according to *dharmaśāstra*, 'the science or discipline of what is right'). While this last is the dominant voice of the culture, it is important that one does not generalize from it. Since Indian culture contains many subcultures, male and female, dominant and 'muted',[1] the frame of reference is vital.

The Inherent Wickedness of Women

There is plenty of evidence in Sanskrit literature for the perceived inherent wickedness of women. Much of it is reproduced in the *Strīdharmapaddhati*, an eighteenth-century Sanskrit treatise on the proper behaviour of women.[2] The author, Tryambaka, concedes that women are indeed inherently wicked. However, he goes on to argue that they are not beyond religious instruction: they can learn how to behave. His scriptural proof is the famous saying, 'good conduct destroys inauspicious marks'.[3] These 'marks' include the inauspicious potential of female nature. Tryambaka's meaning is clear. Women who listen to pandits like himself can learn to behave according to the codes of conduct (*dharma*) laid down for women. They should transform themselves into devoted wives in order that the inherent evil of their female natures may be annulled.[4] The rest of Tryambaka's treatise explains how this may be done.

The Inherent Sexuality of Women

The sexuality of women is closely related to the notion of inherent female nature. However, the familiar Indian equation between the inherent weakness and wickedness of women on the one hand and their inborn sexuality on the other is by no means obvious. For the sexuality of women is not invariably negative. In that same treatise on the perfect wife, Tryambaka recommends a 'bold confidence in sexual matters' (*prāgalbhyaṃ kāmakāryeṣu*).[5] His subsection on going to bed in the evening stresses her sexual initiative:

[1] For the classic statement on dominant and 'muted' groups see E. Ardener, 1975.

[2] An analysis and partial translation of this work is presented in Leslie 1989. All references to the *Strīdharmapaddhati* are to the reconstruction of the text in this work.

[3] *ācāro hanty alakṣaṇam*. Cf. *Manusmṛti* 4.156; *Vasiṣṭhadharmasūtra* 6.8; *Viṣṇusmṛti* 71.91 (V. Krishnamacharya edition, Adyar 1964, Mysore MS).

[4] For an analysis of Tryambaka's discussion on this topic see Leslie 1986 and Leslie 1989:246-72.

[5] *Strīdharmapaddhati* 22v.3-5; Leslie 1989:274.

> After paying homage to her husband's feet, she should go to bed. Treating her beloved in a way that gives him pleasure (*āhlādasaṃyuktaṃ kṛtvā*), she should engage in sexual intercourse (*saṃyogam ācaret*; i.e. she should make love to him).[6]

In another section, he instructs the good wife to 'make sexual advances' (*upasarpati*) to her husband at the appropriate time.[7]

Further evidence both for and against female sexuality may be found in India's great epic, the *Mahābhārata*. This vast poem, which probably evolved between 400 BCE and 200 CE, is primarily an exposition on *dharma*. The well-known story of Bhaṅgāśvana (13.12) is told in support of female sexuality; the equally well-known tale of Aṣṭāvakra and the female ascetic (13.19 ff.) takes a negative stance.

Bhaṅgāśvana is a childless king who, in order to obtain children, performs a fire sacrifice disliked by the god Indra. Bhaṅgāśvana obtains a hundred sons but, in doing so, he enrages Indra who transforms him into a woman. Abandoning both family and kingdom, the female Bhaṅgāśvana retires to the forest. There she meets a male ascetic with whom she has another hundred sons. Her ability to thrive infuriates Indra. This time, he causes the two sets of children to fight and kill each other. The carnage complete, Indra appears to Bhaṅgāśvana and (to cut a long story short) grants her a wish. Without hesitation, Bhaṅgāśvana asks the god to bring back to life the children she produced as a woman – on the grounds that the love of a woman is greater than that of a man (13.12.42). Indra revives both sets of children, and grants Bhaṅgāśvana the further wish of choosing which sex he/she would like to remain for the rest of his/her life. Bhaṅgāśvana chooses to remain a woman – on the grounds that women experience greater pleasure in sexual intercourse than men (13.12.47). This story makes a virtue of the much-maligned sexuality of women.

The fact remains, however, that most statements relating to female sexuality take the opposite view. The classic story in support of this view is that of the youth Aṣṭāvakra and the elderly female ascetic to whom he is sent in preparation for his marriage. Despite her age, the ascetic repeatedly attempts to seduce the young man, assuring him that for women there is no greater delight and no more destructive urge than sex (13.20.59-60, 64-7); that even very old women are consumed by sexual passion (13.22.4-5); and that a woman's sexual desire can never be overcome in all the three worlds (13.22.9). In the *Mahābhārata*, this story is told by the revered elder statesman, Bhīṣma, to demonstrate the true nature of women. His point is that even after the taking of

[6] *Strīdharmapaddhati* 20r.6-7; Leslie 1989:237.

[7] *Strīdharmapaddhati* 40r.1; Leslie 1989:286.

ascetic vows, even in extreme old age, a woman cannot overcome her lustful nature, and therefore one should always beware of the sexuality of women.

Similar evidence can be found elsewhere. In one of the oldest and most important collections of myths and legends, the *Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa* (compiled about 300 to 600 CE), we learn that sex, described as the cause of death in the world, is also the direct result of the passionate nature of women (49.28-9). The *Mahābhārata* links the origin of evil directly to the sexual passion of women (13.40.5-12). The best-known work of *dharmaśāstra*, the *Manusmṛti* (compiled between 200 BCE and 200 CE), provides the familiar saying that women are innately promiscuous, fickle-minded, lacking in love, and unfaithful to their husbands even when closely guarded; indeed, they have been possessed of an indiscriminate sexual desire since time began (9.15). This is certainly the more common prejudice.[8]

The Innate Impurity of Women

The third point in the theory of inherent female nature is provided by the allegation of innate impurity. There are two main arguments in support of this view. First, woman's lack of access to initiation and religious education means that they are unable to use sacred mantras to purify themselves.[9] Second, menstruation pollutes. Indeed, menstruation is perceived as the visible sign both of a woman's sexual appetite and of her innate impurity – and thus, arising from the combination of these two, of her propensity for evil.

At one level, of course, menstruation is simply one of the impurities of the body. The traditional list includes semen, blood, urine, faeces, ear-wax, nail-parings, phlegm, tears, dandruff, and sweat.[10] One might therefore assume that menstrual blood is no more polluting for women than, for example, semen is for men. But this is not the case. According to the powerful mythic context, menstrual blood is far more than a physical impurity; it is the inescapable reminder of women's collective guilt.

The story of Indra's brahminicide is told in a range of texts, one of the earliest and most authoritative accounts being that in the *Taittirīyasaṃhitā* (a liturgical text compiled between 800 and 500 BCE).[11] When the universe is threatened by Viśvarūpa, Indra destroys him. But Viśvarūpa is a brahmin and

[8] In this context, it is no surprise that the independent or 'fierce' (*ugrā*) goddesses are perceived as 'wild destructive females associated with rampant appetite and sexuality, and the blood of battlefield, sacrifice and menstruation' (Leslie 1989:320).

[9] Some of the causes of this historical development are discussed in Leslie 1989:36-8.

[10] See, for example, *Manusmṛti* 5.135.

[11] *Taittirīyasaṃhitā* 2.5.1 ff. For a discussion of the myth in the context of Vedic *śrauta* ritual, see Smith 1991.

Indra is condemned as a brahmin-killer. To escape the consequences of this particularly dreadful crime, Indra persuades the earth, the trees and women to assume one-third of his guilt each. In return, he grants each a wish: the earth, when dug, will heal within one year; trees, when cut, will grow again; and women, unlike all other creatures, will enjoy sexual intercourse at any time, even in advanced pregnancy. In several variations on this theme in other texts, Indra distributes his brahminicide in four parts: among rivers, mountains, earth and women in one text (Mbh.5.10.13); among fire, trees, cows and women in another (Mbh.12.329.28-41); among trees, earth, water and women in a third (*Bhāgavatapurāṇa* 6.9.6-10). In all versions, however, one recipient is constant: women. In some texts, Indra's sin causes the recipients to become impure; in others, the recipients are already impure. According to one source, Indra's guilt is offloaded onto 'foetus-killers'.[12] According to another, it is given to sinful brahmins whose crimes include such things as serving low-caste *śūdras*.[13] In yet another, it falls to those who kill brahmins.[14] In this somewhat confused context, the issue of which came first – the impurity of women or the assumption of Indra's guilt – is blurred.

Either way, the mark of Indra's guilt has two crucial implications: a cyclical fertility and a recurrent power to pollute. In the case of the earth, Indra's guilt takes the form of fissures in the ground during the dry season, the sign of an infertile (and hence inauspicious) land prior to the release of the monsoon rain. During this time, the earth should not be 'ploughed', an obvious metaphor for sexual intercourse. In the case of trees, Indra's guilt takes the form of sap, the vital juice that signals the fecundity of plant life and without which there can be no growth, no fruit; yet the not uncommon ruling that one should avoid the 'red secretions' and resin from cut trees demonstrates a power to pollute.[15] In the case of rivers, the swirling mud-red waters of the rainy season are described in terms of a symbolic menstruation: they are *rajasvalāḥ*, 'full of dirt' or 'full of passion', a word also applied (in both senses) to menstruating women. Such waters should not be entered for fear of pollution: a ruling that applies equally to muddy monsoon rivers and menstruating women.[16]

In women, Indra's guilt takes the form of menstrual blood. Menstruation is thus the sign of a woman's participation in brahmin-murder. It marks her innate impurity, her cyclical fecundity, her uncontrollable sexuality, and, by extension, the inescapable wickedness of her female nature. This is the mythic dimension of what we might call the socio-religious politics of menstruation. Before I elaborate on this further, I shall outline my three frameworks for the discourse on menstruation.

[12] *Atharvaveda*, p.522.

[13] *Skandapurāṇa* 5.3.118.141.

[14] *Rāmāyaṇa* 8.86.10-16.

[15] See, for example, *Manusmṛti* 5.6, *Taittirīyasaṃhitā* 2.5.4.

[16] For a discussion of this point, see Salomon 1984.

Menstruation in the Context of Medical Discourse

The earliest fully developed āyurvedic work, the *Carakasaṃhitā* (probably composed in the first or second centuries BCE, and further redacted over subsequent centuries), explains that there are four criteria of truth: scriptural testimony, direct observation, inference, and reasoning. Anything contrary to reason, we are told, should be rejected as untruth.[17] To these four may be added two more: tradition and analogy.[18] According to *āyurveda*, the human body is a microcosm of the universe. The aim of *āyurveda* is to provide information about the parts and functions of that microcosm.

According to Caraka, conception occurs inside the womb as a result of the union of three things: the mail seed (*bīja*; or semen, *śukra*), the female seed (*strībīja, śoṇita*), and the descending spirit (*jīva, cetanādhātu*) impelled by the *karma* of former lives.[19] If the spirit does not descend, no life can be created and so conception does not occur. In medical texts, the 'female seed' is usually equated with the uterine blood of the mother (*śoṇita* means 'red'), and hence with menstrual blood.[20] The most common terms used to denote menstrual blood are: *ārtava*, described by Bose *et al* as 'a special and fiery variety of blood' (1971:242); and *rajas*, defined as 'the blood of a woman that appears at the time of puberty'.[21] Sexual intercourse enables the man's semen to enter the woman's uterus where it is united with her menstrual blood. The sex of the child depends on the preponderance of either semen or menstrual blood: the former produces a son, the latter a daughter; if the two exist in equal quantity, the resulting offspring is sterile, impotent, or hermaphrodite (*napuṃsaka, klība*). We are also told that conception occurring on odd days of the menstrual cycle produces females because menstrual blood increases in quantity on those days (Jolly 1977:63).

In order to create a normal foetus, both the man's semen and the woman's menstrual blood must be pure. Pure semen is described as transparent, fluid, glossy, sweet-smelling like honey, and like oil or honey in appearance. Pure menstrual blood resembles hare's blood or the colour of lac, and it leaves no stains in washed clothes.[22]

All the medical texts agree that the first three days and nights of the menstrual flow are unsuitable for conception: for then the semen is like an

[17] *Carakasaṃhitā, sūtrasthāna* 11.17-26.
[18] *Carakasaṃhita, vimānasthāna* 8.33.
[19] *Carakasaṃhitā, śarīrasthāna* 4.5.
[20] Mention is also made of the 'semen' of women but, according to the *Aṣṭāṅgasaṃgraha* 2.1, this plays no part in the formation of the foetus. Cf. Jolly 1977:61.
[21] *Suśrutasaṃhitā* 1.14.2.
[22] *Suśrutasaṃhitā* 3.2.17-18; *Aṣṭāṅgasaṃgraha* 2.1.96 ff.; *Aṣṭāṅgahṛdaya* 2.1.10-19.

object cast into fast flowing water and swept away by the stream.[23] During these three days, the menstruating woman should follow a strict regimen designed to encourage a successful pregnancy, a regimen deriving both from notions of health and from magical correlations relating to the future foetus. For example, she should not indulge in sexual intercourse.[24] She should eat only easily digested milk-based foods. She should not sleep too much, laugh too much, hear loud noises, and so on. Breaking these guidelines may injure the unborn child.[25]

At the end of the three days and nights, she should take a cleansing bath, put on fresh clothes and ornaments, and go to her husband. The following twelve days (or, according to some authorities, sixteen) are suitable for conception. This is the period when the woman is deemed to be in 'season' (*ṛtu*). After this period, her womb will not allow the man's semen to enter, just as the lotus closes itself at the end of the day.[26]

The resulting embryo inherits from its mother the soft parts of the body (skin, blood, flesh, fat, heart, liver, lungs, spleen, kidneys, stomach, intestines, and so on), and from its father the hard parts (bones, teeth, veins, tendons, ligaments, arteries, semen, hair and nails).[27] In particular, the child's heart is directly linked to its mother's through the umbilical cord and the placenta. Indeed, medical texts derive *dohada*, the term denoting the cravings of the pregnant woman, by folk etymology from *dvaihṛdaya*, meaning 'two-hearted', on the grounds that the hearts of the mother and child are linked in this way. Hence the ruling that one should never deny the cravings of the pregnant woman.[28] For in indulging the mother-to-be one is in fact indulging the child who still craves for the experiences of its former life.

After conception, the channels carrying the menstrual blood are obstructed by the foetus, which explains why pregnant women no longer menstruate. When a woman's blood is 'obstructed below' in this way, apart from flooding

[23] *Suśrutasaṃhita* 3.2.31.
[24] Somewhat at odds with this idea is the wish Indra granted to women. There are evidently two ways of approaching the question. As a general rule, *āyurveda* stresses the medical aspects and thus the prohibition on sex during pregnancy. *Dharmaśāstra* seems undecided. Some texts follow the myth, insisting that if a woman wants to make love, her husband should not refuse, right up to the delivery of her child (e.g. the *Mitākṣara* commentary on *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* 1.81; *Taittirīyasaṃhitā* 2.5.1.4-5). Others rule that she should avoid sex (e.g. *Strīdharmapaddhati* 4lr.3-4 in the section on the duties of the pregnant woman; Leslie 1989:289).
[25] *Suśrutasaṃhitā* 3.2.25 ff.
[26] *Suśrutasaṃhitā* 3.3.9; *Astāṅgasaṃgraha* 2.1.198.
[27] *Carakasaṃhitā, śarīrasthāna* 3.6-7. According to this view, a child may be born of the combined seed of two women, but it will be a deformed child without bones etc., for these are provided by the seed of the male (*Suśrutasaṃhitā* 3.2.47).
[28] *Aṣṭāṅgahṛdaya, śarīrasthāna* 1.52-3: cf. *Strīdharmapaddhati* 41r.9-4lv.2 (Leslie 1989:289-90).

the placenta to nourish the foetus, it also moves up to her breasts where it forms the future mother's milk.[29] This point deserves emphasis. What in religious and mythic contexts is seen as the most polluting of all substances (i.e. menstrual blood) is transformed into what in those same contexts is one of the purest (i.e. breast-milk).[30] In the context of *āyurveda*, both blood and milk are perceived simply as sources of maternal nourishment, and the process of transformation from one to the other is a physical one.[31] For *āyurveda* is concerned primarily with what are perceived to be the physical facts. While āyurvedic texts inevitably reflect to some extent the assumptions and prejudices of the culture, there is little evidence of an ulterior motive of socio-religious control. Hence the view of menstrual blood and breast-milk as nourishment for the foetus, and the stress on the mechanics of conception. Sermons on the inherent wickedness of women, on the consequences of her innate sexuality, and the polluting powers of menstrual blood, are conspicuously absent.[32]

Menstruation in the Context of Ascetic Discourse

A totally different view of both menstruation and female sexuality is provided by the ascetic mode. In the case of Indian Buddhism, Prince Siddhārtha's transformation into Śākyamuni Buddha is marked by the sensitive young man's revulsion for the sweaty sexuality of dancing girls:

> And the Future Buddha awoke, and ... perceived these women lying asleep, ... some with their bodies wet with trickling phlegm and spittle; some grinding their teeth ...; some with their mouths open; and some with their dress fallen apart so as plainly

[29] *Suśrutasaṃhitā* 3.4.24.

[30] For the symbolism of blood and milk in Purāṇic mythology, see O'Flaherty 1980:40-3. For related ethnographic material see Jeffery, Jeffery and Lyon 1989:76: 'The mother's contribution to the baby's development, then, is towards its growth rather than its essential make-up – and that, too, using defiling blood (*ganda khūn*). ... Early in pregnancy, preparations begin for nurturing the baby after birth: some blood is believed to congeal into breast milk, which remains in the breast and becomes heavy or solidified and yellow in colour ("like pus").'

[31] 'The developing foetus takes its strength from the mother's retained menstrual blood' (Jeffery, Jeffery and Lyon 1989:76).

[32] This is not the only instance in which *āyurveda* stands out against the normative tradition. Remedies are often prescribed without regard for the expectations of Hindu orthodoxy, and without either apology or explanation for breaking normative rules. For example, the wholesome properties of meat and alcohol are discussed without reference to the religious context (e.g. *Carakasaṃhitā, sūtrasthāna* 27.311; *cikitsāsthāna* 24.61). These are not the texts of unbelievers (atheists, *cārvākas*): the authors are pious enough, but their first allegiance is to the 'science of life' (*āyurveda*).

> to disclose their loathsome nakedness.[33]

A second-century retelling of the same episode describes how, when the prince saw these women lying dishevelled and twitching in their sleep, he was moved to scorn. This, he concluded, is the nature of women (*svabhāva*): 'impure and monstrous (*aśucir vikṛtaś ca*) in the world of living beings'.[34] Here is the standard (or male) ascetic identification of the phenomenal world with sensual pleasures, typified by women as essentially worldly and sexual beings. The future Buddha's aversion for the female body constitutes a step forward on his path to enlightenment.

The aversion displayed by Jain ascetic discourse is even more striking. The issue is this. The last great teacher of the Jains was Mahāvīra who may have lived around 599 to 527 BCE. He was a naked ascetic (*acelaka śramaṇa*). There is no disagreement on this point; disagreement arises only in the interpretation to be put upon this fact. Is nakedness an essential prerequisite of renunciation? Or is it merely an optional, if commendable, practice? Broadly speaking, by about 300 BCE, Jainism had split into two camps: on the one hand, the naked or 'sky-clad' Digambaras for whom nakedness was an essential part of the renouncer's path; and on the other, the 'white-clad' Śvetāmbaras for whom it was not. However, both sides agreed that women should never be naked in public – on grounds ranging from the fact of menstruation to the inherent sexuality of women, and even to their vulnerability to sexual harassment. Thus this major split came to focus on the question of whether or not women can attain salvation. For the Śvetāmbaras, initiation into the monastic life is sufficient proof of renunciation, both for men and for women (although it is conceded that the life of the renouncer is especially hard for women). For the Digambaras, the wearing of clothes (whether by men or by women) signals an incomplete renunciation, while the female body is itself proof of inadequate spiritual advancement. According to the Digambaras, then, it is impossible for a woman to attain liberation; to be more precise, the (non-gendered) individual self cannot attain salvation immediately after a lifetime as a woman. However pious she may be, the most that a woman can hope for is to be reborn in a male body; only then will she have access to the true path of renunciation (that is, the path of the naked male ascetic). This is the path which culminates in *mokṣa*, release from the cycle of rebirth.

The arguments for and against the likelihood of women attaining salvation are catalogued in the Jain texts.[35] Some of these arguments are familiar, even predictable: the male ascetic's rejection of the social and physical world; his

[33] From the introduction to the *Jātaka* or 'Birth stories' of the Buddha (Warren 1896:60-1).

[34] *Buddhacarita* 5.63-4. See Cowell 1894.

[35] See Jaini 1991.

contempt for women as the symbols of sexuality, procreation, and society in general; and so on. What is startling, however, is the unbridled disgust for women's bodies and, in particular, for that most physical (and, according to tradition, essentially sexual) process, menstruation. The latest contribution to the debate is found in the *Yuktiprabodha* ('Teaching Through Arguments') by the seventeenth-century Śvetāmbara author, Meghavijaya. In this work, Meghavijaya sets out to demolish eighty-six points of Digambara doctrine, including their much-disputed views regarding the salvation of women (*strīmokṣa*). *The Yuktiprabodha* includes the following statements of the Digambara point of view:

> Women, namely, those beings who have the physical sign of the human female, do not attain mokṣa in that very life for their souls do not manifest that pure transformation which is called "a Perfected Being" (Siddha).[36]
>
> ... the biologically female is distinguished ... by the fact that she has an impure body, as is evident by the flow of [menstrual] blood each month.[37]
>
> Moreover, it is said in the scriptures that on account of the constant flow of the menstrual blood, various types of minute beings are generated in the genitals of women; this also occurs on other parts of her body, such as the breasts.[38]

This picture of women's genitals and breasts as prime sources of impurity, swarming with microscopic creatures, may be contrasted with the matter-of-fact āyurvedic statement that menstrual blood and breast-milk are sources of maternal nourishment. For the Jain theologians, however, menstruation is a

[36] *Yuktiprabodha* 1 (Jaini 1991:162). The commentary explains: 'The specific use of the word "*dravyataḥ*" [i.e. biologically] indicates that males who possess the female libido (*bhāvataḥ*) [and thus can be considered psychologically female] are not inherently opposed to the attainment of mokṣa.' As the ensuing discussion makes clear, the Digambaras do not deny the possibility of salvation to men who are 'psychologically female' (i.e. homosexual) nor do they allow it to women who are 'psychologically male' (i.e. lesbian). The issue is not sexual or psychological orientation, or even spiritual advancement, but simply a matter of physical fact: the female body demonstrates the impurity of the soul within. The Digambara position on this point concludes: 'We therefore maintain that there is no mokṣa possible for those persons who are biologically female, because crookedness (kauṭilya) is their very nature. ... As it is often said in the world: "Falsehood, rashness, deceitfulness, foolishness, excessive greed, lack of affection and pitilessness are the innate faults of women".' (*Yuktiprabodha* 2-8).

[37] *Yuktiprabodha* 10 (Jaini 1991:166).

[38] *Yuktiprabodha* 12 (Jaini 1991:166).

form of violence (*hiṃsā*): the flow of blood destroys countless minute living beings (*aparyāpta*). Moreover, as a result of these bodily secretions and their inhabitants, women suffer from a constant itching which gives rise to continuous and uncontrollable sexual desire. This leads to the further violence of sexual intercourse. The *Yuktiprabodha* provides quotations to this effect:

> The Omniscients have said that when a man is overcome by sexual passion and engages in sexual activity, he kills 900,000 minute beings [i.e, the sperm cells in the ejaculate]...
>
> In the vagina of a woman also, beings ... are born, numbering ... up to ... 300,000.
>
> When a man and a woman unite sexually, these beings in the vagina are destroyed, just as if a red-hot iron were inserted into a hollow piece of bamboo [filled with sesame seeds].[39]

The logic is clear. How can woman become renouncers when they are never free of sexual desire and when their very bodies form the site and sources of violence against living beings?

Nor is menstruation condoned as an involuntary process. On the contrary, it is perceived as the consequence of 'a sexual volition ... comparable to a man's emission of semen in a dream'.[40] As a result, menstruation – together with its underlying cause, female sexuality – creates in women two powerful emotional forces; a deep sense of shame (which compels them to wear clothes in order to hide their bodies from men); and a constant fear of sexual assault (perceived as the male response to the sexually active woman). The constant presence of these powerful emotions of shame and fear (from which men by the very nature of their bodies are deemed to be free) renders women unfit to take the higher vows of the religious mendicant.

Now this is far more than the usual negative view of menstruation, the taboo that can be observed in so many traditional cultures all over the world. It constitutes an elaborate phobia about the reproductive process and a radical contempt for women's bodies. But perhaps we need to be reminded of the context of this alarming centuries-long debate. The issue of nakedness is part of an interminable battle of wits between two opposed sects. Given the attitudes towards women in Indian literature in general, and in ascetic discourse in particular, it is unlikely that any of the male debaters cared very deeply about the salvation of women. It is far more likely, as Goldman suggests, that the

[39] *Yuktiprabodha* 69 (Jaini 1991: 179). These statements are presented by the *Śvetāmbara* spokesman who, while evidently accepting their validity in the case of ordinary women, argues that they do not apply to nuns who refrain from all sexual activity and who 'maintain extreme skillfullness and presence of mind'.

[40] Jaini 1991:13-14. Cf. *Yuktiprabodha* 89 and Jaini 1991:192-3, note 49.

debate was 'a kind of protracted metaphor for a struggle over the spiritual validity of the two paths of Jaina mendicancy'.[41] This is the hidden agenda. For the Digambaras, this obsessive picture of menstruation and female sexuality is a vital part of their argument that their white-clad rivals are at the same secondary level of spiritual advancement as their own pious but white-clad Digambara women. By describing the female body, and menstruation in particular, in terms calculated to disgust, and by simultaneously equating these physical processes with the need to wear white garments, the Digambaras intended to tar the Śvetāmbaras with the same polluting brush.

Menstruation in the Context of Normative Discourse

I shall now turn to *dharmaśāstra* and, in particular, to Tryambaka's views on menstruation in the *Strīdharmapaddhati*. Under the general heading of 'duties common to all women' (*strīṇāṃ sādhāraṇā dharmāḥ*), Tryambaka groups together a variety of rulings to form nine sections, one of which details 'the duties of the menstruating woman' (*rajasvalādharmāḥ*).[42] This is a loosely structured section that touches on most of the points normally made on the subject in *dharmaśāstric* texts.

The woman herself is described in a number of different ways that together demonstrate the ambivalent attitudes towards her. For example *puṣpiṇī* and *puṣpavatī* (meaning 'bearing flowers' or 'in bloom') are positive terms of almost horticultural heartiness.[43] In contrast, there is the blunt *malavadvāsas* ('she whose clothes are stained'), or the graphic *ārtavābhiplutā* ('overflowing with menstrual blood'). More euphemistic terms include *rajasvalā* ('full of impurity, or dirt, or passion'; recalling the mud-red monsoon rivers) and *strīdharmiṇī* ('she who has the duty or condition of women'). These last two terms manage to encapsulate within the definition of the menstruating woman our three themes of the inherent nature of women, sexual passion, and innate impurity.

The first point that Tryambaka makes is that 'the menstruating woman is impure for three (days and) nights'.[44] According to a famous quotation:

> On the first day, she is declared to be [as polluting as] an untouchable; on the second, [as polluting as] a brahmin-killer;

[41] Foreword by R. P. Goldman, in Jaini 1991:xx.

[42] Leslie 1989:283-8.

[43] The implications of these terms may not be wholly positive. In *Bhagavadgītā* 2.42, for example, the adjective *puṣpita* ('flowered'; in this context, 'flowery' speech) suggests something without substance, bearing flowers but not the all-important fruit. I am grateful to Tuvia Gelblum for this suggestion.

[44] *Strīdharmapaddhati* 33v.8-9 (Leslie 1989:283).

> on the third, [as polluting as] a washerwoman; on the fourth, she is purified.[45]

I have already discussed the significance of this impurity, and the traditional tracing of its origins to the story of Indra's brahminicide.

Equally predictable are the innumerable prohibitions relating to the menstruating woman. Some of these demonstrate her impure state: for example the ruling that she should not touch (i.e. pollute) fire; that is, she should not cook.[46] Some strive to avoid deepening that state of impurity still further: for example, she should not cut her nails. Others demand that she should not make herself attractive: for example, she should not use collyrium for her eyes, comb her hair, take a bath, or massage her body with oil.[47] Nor should she in any way suggest that she is sexually available: for example, she should not eat from her husband's plate; she should not even look at her husband. In effect, she is in no fit state to do anything.

These prohibitions are reinforced by the threat of defects accruing to the unborn child. As in the āyurvedic context, the link often reflects a magical correlation. For example, if she uses collyrium, her child will be blind in one or both eyes. If she combs her hair, he will be bald. If she massages her body with oil, he will have a skin disease. If she takes a bath, he will die by drowning. If she cleans her teeth, his teeth will be discoloured. If she cuts her nails, his nails will be diseased. If she plaits rope, her child will hang himself. If she laughs, his palate, lips and tongue will be discoloured. If she talks a lot, he will be a chatterbox. If she hears a loud noise, he will be deaf. If she runs, he will be unstable. If she roams about, he will be insane. And so on.

The most important prohibition of all is the ban on sex. If a menstruating woman makes love during the crucial three days, her child will be an untouchable, or cursed. Hence the detailed prohibitions to ensure that she is neither available nor attractive to her husband at this time.

Next come the rulings regarding the ritual bath of purification. Towards the end of the morning on the fourth day, she should cleanse herself with sixty lumps of earth (the high number indicating the depths of her impurity).[48] Then she should clean her teeth, and take a ritual bath. Pure once more, she should gaze at the sun, pray for a male child, and attend to her 'women's duties'. According to one quotation:

[45] *Strīdharmapaddhati* 36r.2-3 (Leslie 1989:283).

[46] Leslie 1989:284.

[47] For some of the implications of rulings relating to a woman's appearance, see Leslie 1992:198-213.

[48] This high number is exceeded by that stipulated for the polluting and inauspicious menstruating widow (Leslie 1989:286).

> When she has bathed properly, she should look at her husband's face..., or (if he is away) she should look at the sun while meditating on her husband in her mind.[49]

That evening, she should make sexual advances to her husband. A second quotation is more explicit:

> Anointed with unguents of ground turmeric and saffron, wearing bright garments, thinking of her husband's lotus foot, gazing at her own toes [i.e. keeping her eyes cast down], not looking at other men, thinking only of her husband, thinking of him as light itself..., beautifully dressed and ornamented and anointed with perfume, and in good spirits, she should go to bed.[50]

This is an entirely positive (if male-oriented) image of female sexuality. Within the framework of marriage, and in the wider context of the dharmaśāstric norm of the householder, sex in pursuit of progeny is appropriate. Within that context, female sexuality as an expression of fertility is highly auspicious.

But what if the menstrual flow does not cease on the morning of the fourth day? Tryambaka is quite clear. If bleeding continues after the fourth day, she is considered 'fit to be touched' by her husband and therefore pure with regard to sexual intercourse with her husband, that is, she should still make love to him. Until her menstrual flow has ceased altogether, however, she is not held to be 'of pure conduct' and therefore she is not 'fit to perform the ritual worship of the gods'.[51]

We may speculate on the hidden agenda here. I suggest that a number of issues are at stake. First, there is the overriding importance of establishing a pregnancy in the hope of producing sons. A blanket prohibition on sexual intercourse during the menstrual flow might prevent a couple from taking advantage of the woman's 'season'. Second, there is perhaps the desire to take the initiative out of the hands of women. A woman who does not wish to have sex, or who is anxious not to conceive, might use persistent bleeding as an excuse. Finally, vaginal bleeding remains a bodily impurity that requires some form of purification before any religious ritual. A ruling attributed to the *Smṛticandrikā*, a thirteenth-century collection of rulings on *dharma*, makes this clear:

[49] *Strīdharmapaddhati* 37v.3-4 (Leslie 1989:286).
[50] *Strīdharmapaddhati* 37v.5-7 (Leslie 1989:287).
[51] *Strīdharmapaddhati* 36r.6-8 (Leslie 1989:287).

> For women (who continue to bleed from the fourth) until the twelfth day, the purification (appropriate) for urine is required; a ritual bath is (prescribed for those who bleed from the twelfth) until the eighteenth day; after that, she is (again) impure for three days (i.e. it is assumed that another cycle has begun).

The distinction between vaginal bleeding and menstrual blood proper is a nice one: it gives a man maximum access to his wife's body; it makes the greatest possible allowance for pregnancy; and yet it continues to protect religious ritual from pollution.

This point is taken further. Still using the *Smṛticandrikā* as his source, Tryambaka explains that the menstruating woman loses two kinds of blood:

> That which occurs to women at the wrong time (i.e. outside the crucial three days) men call 'blood' (*raktam*); that which occurs at the right time (i.e. within those three days) is called 'menstrual blood' (*rajas*); as a result of the latter alone, she becomes impure.[52]

The distinction being made here is evidently not the āyurvedic one between pure and impure substances, between healthy and sickly menstrual blood: the consistency and colour of the blood is not discussed. Nor does it reflect the phobic response of the Jain ascetic to all female fluids. Rather it represents a clash of dichotomies. According to the pure/impure dichotomy, all impurities of the body (blood, semen, sweat and so on) render a person impure. According to the auspicious/inauspicious dichotomy, menstruation bears the added weight of two quite different elements: the mythological burden of Indra's sin of brahmin-murder, and the extreme inauspiciousness of infertility. On those first three days of her menstrual cycle, a woman is temporarily barren and, as in the case of the cracked dry earth before the monsoon rains, infertility makes her inauspicious. But on the fourth day of the menstrual cycle, whether or not the flow of blood has ceased, women are deemed to be in 'season' once more, both fertile and auspicious. Here auspiciousness overrides impurity, not entirely, but with crucial effect: 'menstrual blood' (*rajas*) is redesignated '(ordinary) blood' (*raktam*). Fertility wins the day.

Another quotation provides a more detailed definition:

> The best of wise men know that the menstruation of women is of four kinds: that which is due to illness; that which is due to (a disturbance of) the emotions; that which is due to (an imbalance

[52] *Strīdharmapaddhati* 35v.6-9 (Leslie 1989:283-4).

> of) the humours; and that which occurs at the right time (of the monthly cycle, i.e. during the crucial three days).[53]

Tryambaka concludes that only the fourth type of bleeding makes a woman ritually impure.

Finally, there are the rulings concerning the importance of making love at the proper time. These take the form of penalties or atonements enjoined for those husbands and wives who fail to take proper advantage of the opportunity to conceive. For example,

> A man who fails in his duty to his wife should put on the skin of a donkey with the hair turned outwards and go to seven houses calling (out to each in turn): '(Give) alms to a man who has failed in his duty to his wife!' And this should be his livelihood for six months.[54]

In fact, this ruling is normally cited in the context of adultery. A variety of penalties may be imposed on the wife who refuses to make love; and again, these are penalties usually associated with adultery. For example, according to one authority, she should perform a severe twelve-day penance every month for six months. According to another, she should be abandoned. According to a third, she should be devoured by dogs in a public place. An anonymous source maintains that she will be reborn as a bitch, a she-wolf, a female jackal or a female hog. Yet another authority enjoins that her husband should proclaim her publicly to be a foetus-killer and drive her out of his house. Tryambaka concludes by demonstrating that the woman who leaves her husband's house, even to return to her natal home, is assumed to be unfaithful.[55]

These rulings bring us full circle. The woman who refuses to make love with her husband at the auspicious time of her fertile season is demonstrating (albeit by implication) the promiscuity or negative sexuality commonly cited in discussions of the inherent wickedness of women. Sudhir Kakar describes this type of discourse as 'the cornerstone of the culture's official view of women', thereby acknowledging its power. These rules and images, which Kakar refreshingly dismisses as 'a collective fantasy of the wife' (1989:18-19), focus on the possible sexual abandon of adult women, and the implications of that abandon for a culture that depends upon its stability to control the sexuality of women.

In contrast, the woman who makes sexual advances to her husband at the proper time makes both herself and her sexuality auspicious. For the

[53] *Strīdharmapaddhati* 35v.3-4 (Leslie 1989:284).
[54] *Strīdharmapaddhati* 37v.7-9 (Leslie 1989:287).
[55] Leslie 1989:287-8.

auspiciousness of a wife lies in the gift of her fertility (and thus of progeny) to her husband and her husband's family. Puberty marks the onset of that fertility; hence the celebrations of the first menstruation in many parts of India. For the wife, the blood that signals the start of another menstrual period means several things: temporary impurity, certainly; but also proof of pregnancy lost, and thus of a temporary but exceedingly inauspicious barrenness. On the fourth day of the cycle, however, after her bath of purification, both fertility and auspiciousness return, and the scales tip the other way. Indeed the start of a woman's fertile 'season' is so powerfully auspicious that Tryambaka can write in his section on the inherent nature of women that menstruation is the mark of an all-encompassing purity unique to women:

> Women are incomparably pure; at no time are they defiled; for menstruation sweeps away their sins month after month.[56]

Conclusions

So what conclusions can we draw? For *āyurveda*, the issue is the pragmatic one of healthy versus unhealthy substances. For the male ascetic, the motive force is renunciation of the physical and sexual world, and hence contempt for women's bodies as the epitome of both. For *dharmaśāstra*, dominated by the householder code with the reproductive power of women at its core, bodily fluids are impure but fertility is auspicious. This is the dominant voice of a culture that both controls and depends upon the sexuality of women. Furthermore, as each of my three different frameworks demonstrates, fascination, disgust and fear all relate directly to the power of women to create and nourish life from the substance of their own bodies. The particular substance that serves to focus this confused attention is the essentially sexual fluid of menstrual blood.

[56] *Strīdharmapaddhati* 21v.9-10 (Leslie 1989:254). In fact, this is the standard argument not for the purity of women *per se*, but for the proper treatment of the wife who has been raped or abducted, or who has temporarily left her husband. When the next menstrual period demonstrates that she is not carrying another man's child, she may once more be accepted into the marital home. For some writers on *dharmaśāstra*, menstruation purifies a woman of 'mental adultery' such as impure thoughts but not of 'physical adultery'; for others, the issue is whether or not she conceives (see Leslie 1989:254-5).

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