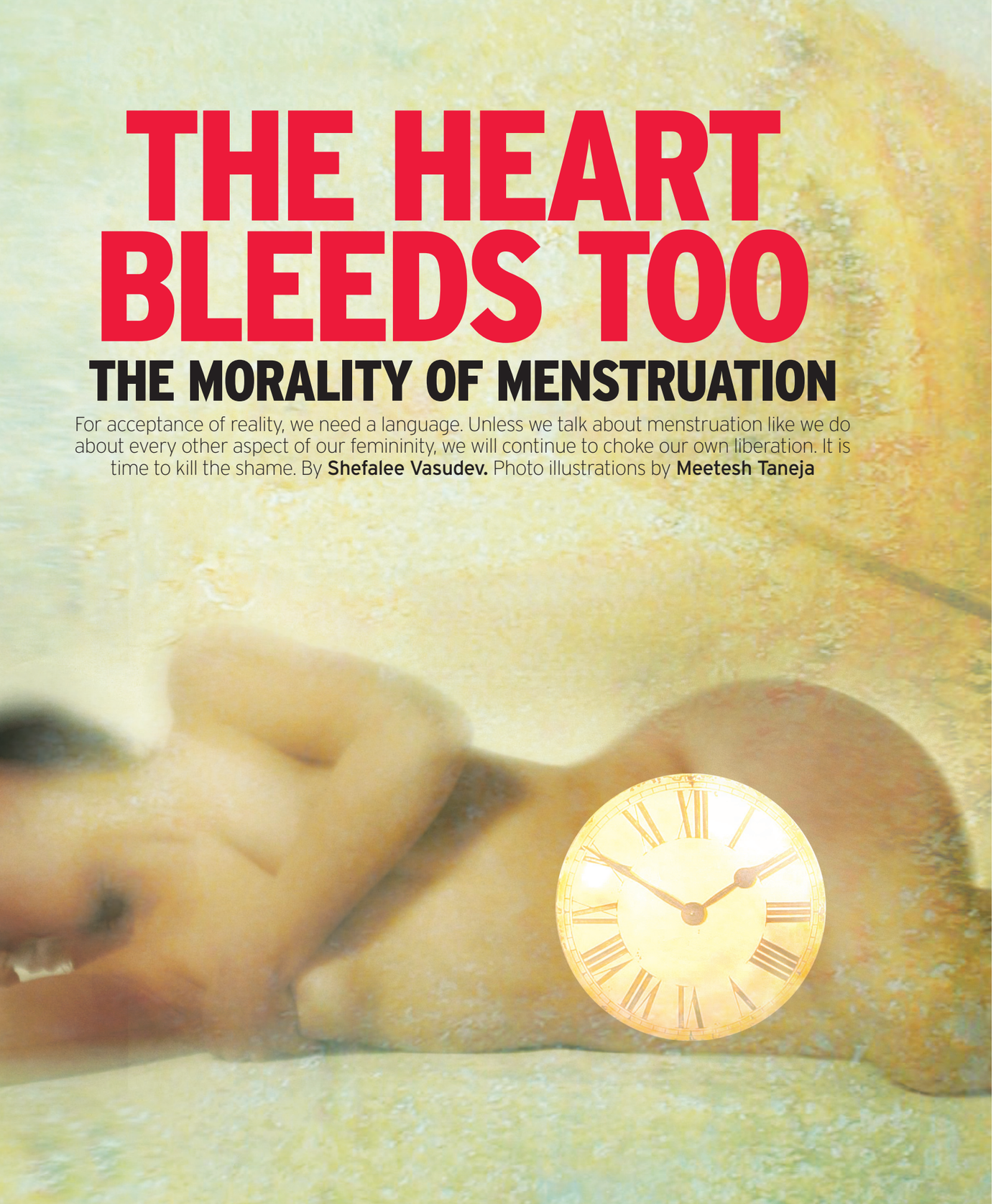
THE HEART BLEEDS TOO

THE MORALITY OF MENSTRUATION

For acceptance of reality, we need a language. Unless we talk about menstruation like we do about every other aspect of our femininity, we will continue to choke our own liberation. It is time to kill the shame. By **Shefalee Vasudev.** Photo illustrations by **Meetesh Taneja**



A WOMAN'S HEART IS AS INVISIBLE AS HER VAGINA. THEN WHY IS THE vagina such a hidden, unused reference? Everything related to the metaphorical folds of the vagina – the uterus, pubic hair and the blood that seeps through it a few days each month – is a muted reality. A calendar-based comfort with one's body.

In college, it was in a Germaine Greer book that I stumbled upon D.H. Lawrence's words in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, "Connie felt things in her womb…" The stark line fascinated and troubled me. The womb, with its shame and pride, is an infallible pillar in medical, social and philosophic experience of womanhood across the world. It is also a political entity. It can unite or destroy. It accepts, rejects, persuades, nurtures, hurts and bleeds.

Unfortunately, growing up as a girl in India has little to do with Lawrence or Greer. Puberty is celebrated in some regions, whereas in others, its very evidence is taboo. Mothers heave a sigh of relief that "she has got them" but caution their daughters against announcing it. Girls who don't menstruate are labelled 'barren' and those who do are 'impure'. It is an irreversible curse for women, wail midwives, whereas priests insist it is their fortune.

No wonder we remain deeply conflicted about it. Education, liberation and reflection may help analyse inner censorship but they don't necessarily lead to conflict resolution. "I feel like a complete woman during my periods," says Shikha Nathani, a 29-year-old school teacher. Shikha had to take long hormonal treatment to sort out irregular periods and now associates them with her feminine self. This hasn't empowered her to discuss it openly even with her would-be husband, though, and she believes that she will be cursed if she participates in a *pooja* during her periods. Complete woman?

Women may want to have sex during their periods and many admit it is more erotic, but would they break religious or social taboos associated with it? No. On the other hand, quite a few men think we should move on. "Women themselves believe that they are unclean, vulnerable and weak. What can a man do?" asks physiotherapist Sandeep Trivedi. "Menstruation is a biological function. What has impurity got to do with it?" asks Shrikant Kelkar, a Dubai-based chartered accountant brought up in an open-minded family in India. Shrikant finds nothing wrong in having sex with a menstruating woman nor with her participating in a *pooja*. Though he pertinently asks: Who am I to decide?

In some cases though, men do decide. S. Ganesh, an astrologer with the Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan, Delhi, says that *ritukarnam* taboos are in the Hindu *shastras* and are sacrosanct. In his household, women stay in a separate room during their periods and cannot partake in the household chores. "In fact, I believe it is scientific," he adds. "If a woman observes a fast and adheres to the menstrual guidelines of the *shastras*, she will live a longer, healthier life," he says.

If the debate were truly scientific, it would be easy to argue it out. But since it is linked to religious codes, it is not simple for women to question or violate what is handed down as 'morality'. "Consciousness comes from language and we have no language for this." Sorry, but isn't Germaine Greer right?

A therapist talks about a patient coping with uterine cancer. "She'd never talked about her periods to anyone, so talking about cancer of her uterus was blasphemy. But talking was her prescription, crucial to save her from dying of depression instead of cancer." It is a tricky assertion. If menstrual taboos prevent us from living a rational life, we must question them. But first, we must question our own convictions. Do we really believe that a place of worship becomes impure with a menstruating woman? A truthful answer may be the Let Me Be Me choice. ■

MENSTRUAL SUPERSTITIONS IN INDIA

- Shouldn't go to temple or touch a holy book or *pooja* things
- Shouldn't see birds
- Shouldn't sit on the threshold
- Dog shouldn't eat a menstruating woman's leftover food
- Shouldn't touch stored foods and pickles
- Shouldn't see men before bathing
- A widow or the menarchal girl's mother shouldn't be first to see her
- Lizard shouldn't eat menstrual blood fibres
- Shouldn't touch plants
- Shouldn't keep flowers
- Shouldn't touch infants
- Shouldn't go out at noon
- Should take *neem* and piece of iron while going to school

CUSTOMS ACROSS THE WORLD

JEWISH CULTURES: A girl is slapped lightly on getting her first period. Orthodox Jewish women take a ritual bath (*mikveh*) after their period to make themselves 'clean' again.

HOLLAND: It is believed that if a menstruating woman goes around a cabbage patch, it will get rid of the caterpillars in it.

TURKEY: Muslim women are not allowed to enter a mosque, touch the Koran or fast during Ramadan while they are menstruating. They also cannot enter the sacred part of the city during Haj, and usually make the journey after menopause.

PORTUGAL: Every winter, households kill a pig and cure its meat for later use. Menstruating women are not allowed to enter a house where a pig is being cured as it is believed she can ruin the meat by just looking at it.

HAWAII: Certain north and south American cultures employ a system of 'menstrual huts', where women stay in complete isolation during menses.

Compiled by Aekta

"THE FLOWERS ARE UPON ME"

Surgeon and writer **Kaveri Nambisan** talks about the layers of discrimination Indian women face when we menstruate, all because we confuse traditional farce with virtue

It was a delicious February afternoon in Delhi; an energetic game of seven-tiles followed a birthday lunch. Game over, a few children started to say goodbyes. The birthday girl smoothed her frock and jumping up, followed them to the gate.

Her older sister caught her arm and whispered: "Come quick!" Behind a bougainvillaea bush, she lifted her yellow frock. Deftly unpinning the exhibition hanky on the birthday girl's chest, she mopped her thighs and then ran into the house, calling out to their mother. "She's got it!"

The mother told her younger daughter that blood would seep from her every month for a few days for another 30 or 40 years. The girl did not believe it. She had heard whispers in school hinting at such a possibility but had dismissed them like some implausible horror story. The mother showed her how she must protect herself with a folded piece of white cloth passed between the thighs and held up with a string around her waist. And afterwards? She must wash it in the toilet and hang it to dry where no one else would see.

She did. Three days after this birthday gift she was back to seven-tiles and badminton, even cricket and football with the boys. And then the bleeding returned. In the bathroom she scrubbed the bloodstains from the white cloth that soon became an unsightly brown. The cloth chafed her skin and caused painful weals on her thighs. It hurt to walk; but she did not tell her mother or sister.

At eleven, her life became an agony of waiting for the monthly nightmare. She tried to understand: if she did not physically exert herself perhaps the bleeding would be less? She moved slowly, like an old woman. The cloth sometimes let her down and she came back with stains on her school skirt, which she washed in secret. In class, every time she stood up, she turned to look for telltale signs on the bench. She avoided boys and stopped playing games. Studies suffered.

When the family went to their village in Karnataka, her family forbade her to go to the temple for the Kali festival. ▷

◁ "Why is it my fault?" she asked. "If you go to the temple when you're unclean, God will curse you and the family," her grandmother said. "And now that you have matured, you must stop being so free with the boys." Her girlhood was buried forever and she was not yet twelve.

That girl, dear reader, was I.

Examples such as mine are quite common. In medical college, our anatomy professor defined menstruation as 'the cry of a disappointed uterus'. Girls coyly referred to it as 'my chum.' Thanks to outdated customs, for many of us, menstruation is anything but a friend.

In almost all communities in India, strictures are imposed. Among many Hindus, a woman lives in seclusion during her period, cooking her food in separate utensils, eating by herself and sleeping separately. A young girl's first period is announced to the village in rituals and celebrations without any thought of her sentiments. Why and how did a normal body function get labelled as a curse? Primitive man was puzzled by the mysterious seepage of blood from a woman's body. The menstrual blood was feared as being polluted. A failed crop, a withering tree or scanty rainfall could be attributed to an 'unclean' woman. In *The Golden Bough,* Sir James Frazer describes how in some African tribes the girls were secluded in cages for three to five years after their first period so no man was in danger of being defiled. Cruel customs were prevalent in most parts of the world. A heartrending account is Robert Graves' description of John Milton's wedding night in *Wife to Mr Milton*. He describes the shock and fury of the poet when he discovers that his sixteen-year-old bride is on her period. Listen to him:

"Oh heavens! Is it possible? Can she be so ignorant and sluttish or unthinking as to play this trick on me? Wife, did your mother never tell you that these flowers defile a man and that a husband must, by the Law of God, separate himself from his wife while they are upon her?" He made the poor girl's life miserable for a long time afterwards.

Every religion has some way of imposing restrictions on a menstruating woman. The Ayurvedic treatise Ashtanga Hrdayam prescribes certain rigours: "From the moment of appearance of the menstrual flow, for a period of three days, the woman should harbour only good thoughts, avoid bath [!] and decorations, sleep on mattress of *darbha* grass, eat little food prepared from milk and barley; hold the food either in a leaf, earthen plate or the hands in order to purify the alimentary tract and to make herself thin. She should also observe celibacy." Nowhere does it say that the woman is polluted. Religious dogma and priestly interference came later and are, sadly, still practised.

> "Why and how did a normal feminine body function get labelled as a curse?"

I broke the temple taboo when I was fifteen, without letting anyone know. So ▷

much for a stupid man-made edict. It is sad that we still give in to such taboos. As a doctor I am approached by women who want 'pills' to postpone a period on the eve of their wedding day, a holiday or for a *pooja*. I try to convince them about the folly of interfering with a natural body cycle. The pills used to postpone a period can affect health, especially fertility and the circulation of blood. Menstruation is a sign of good reproductive health. It is the monthly shedding of the inner lining of the womb along with the unfertilised egg that is shed in the absence of pregnancy.

I worry about menstrual cleanliness of our women. Disposable sanitary napkins have been available in India from the late fifties but a very small percentage can afford them. Many don't use them out of ignorance or due to mother-in-law interference. ("We managed without such expensive comforts, why can't you?") Most women make do with strips of cloth, which is all right if changed often and washed and dried thoroughly before reuse. Poorer women use dark-coloured cloth to mask stains. The washed cloth is hung to dry in hidden corners, thus depriving it of the sterilising effect of sunlight. Still-moist, malodorous cloth leads to genital tract infections, backache and infertility.

> "Not one company has tried to introduce affordable napkins"

Not one sanitary napkin manufacturing company has tried to introduce inexpensive napkins. Some years ago, the self-help women's group at a Tata Tea hospital in Tamil Nadu started a small venture of making sanitary napkins. It was a project I was involved in. The women purchased cotton and gauze at bulk rates, prepared napkins and sterilised them. They packed and sold them among themselves and to other workers. A girl whose parents were labourers told me of her joy in staying clean: "Now I don't dread going out to work or setting out on long bus journeys." Any woman who must visit lavatories in bus stations across the country will understand.

A period is no more unclean than the ejaculation of semen by a male. What censure does he face? Evils like the stigma of menstruation are the result of male exploitation and female servility. It is high time we chucked both out of the window. Confusing tradition-bound farce with virtue is foolish, and destroys the woman in each of us. Condemn ugly customs, reach out to those who need help and let every woman live to her full potential. When she gets her period, like Milton's wife, let her smile and say, "The flowers are upon me." ■

MENSTRUAL HEALTH IN INDIA

SCHOOL WOES: The Indian water and sanitation sector is silent on menstrual management, according to one study by Junction Social. Although poor sanitation is correlated with absenteeism and dropout rates of schoolgirls, efforts in school sanitation have ignored menstrual management in latrine design and construction. *Menstrual Hygiene And Management In Developing Countries: Taking Stock*

NAPKIN NUMBERS: In a survey conducted among both rural and urban schools in Pondicherry, only 5 per cent girls report using commercial sanitary napkins, while 82 per cent used old cloth. Despite elaborate puberty rituals, most girls did not understand the implications of their first period. Taboos surrounding maintenance of menstrual cloths led to unhygienic storage and consequently greater incidence of genital infections. *Asia-Pacific Population Journal*

FEAR FACTOR: As per one survey in Shimla, the major reaction to the first menstruation was fear (98.5 per cent) and 21 per cent of girls slept separately during periods. Only 41 per cent girls knew that menarche means the beginning of reproductive life. *A.K. Gupta, Journal of Obstetrics & Gynaecology – Abingdon*

BLOOMING INDUSTRY The Indian feminine hygiene industry is worth Rs 200 crore. *India Brand Equity Foundation*

Compiled by Aekta

HOW YOU CAN HELP GOONJ: A charitable organisation that helps recycle surplus household products from urban areas to distribute to the poor and calamity-struck, also collects old cloth, cuts it to size, washes, sanitises and packages it for the menstruation needs of rural women. For more info, contact 011-26972351 or 9868146978 VikalpDesign: This social communications organisation (focusing on rural health) teaches rural women in Rajasthan how to sew reusable sanitary cloths themselves using cotton cloth, plastic and basic buttons. For more information, contact 0294-2451411/2454092

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