



Laoate: Perception and anticipation of the menarche of Kandha adolescents in Odisha

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Abstract

Menarche, or the onset of first menstruation, is an important developmental milestone in the life of adolescent girls and is often shaped by cultural beliefs and traditional practices. Among the Kandha tribal community of Odisha, menarche is not only viewed as a biological change but also as an important social and cultural transformation. The anticipation of menarche among Kandha adolescents is shaped by community norms, family guidance, and traditional knowledge passed from older women to younger girls. The present study aims to explore the perceptions and anticipation of Kandha adolescent girls regarding menarche. In addition, the study examines feelings such as fear, curiosity, and social experiences related to menarche among Kandha. A descriptive research design is adopted to collect data from adolescent girls in the Kandha community through direct interviews and observation with 59 adolescent girls.

Keywords: Menarche, puberty knowledge, cultural beliefs, emotional preparedness, traditional perceptions

Introduction

For most women, menstruation is a normal and healthy part of life, from the age of 12 to 51. Menstrual health is an integral part of women's health. The tribal people have their own culture, traditions and languages. Menarche, in the Kui language called Laoate, is considered an important Intermediate stage in life for every girl. In this study focus is given on Perception and Anticipation of menarche among the Kandha adolescent girls of Kalahandi District, Odisha. While menstruation is normal, the taboos, restrictions, and beliefs of traditional women remain prevalent amongst the Kandha communities and result in a lack of easy access to accurate information and open discussion. Hence, adolescent girls are often confused, scared and lacking proper guidance during the menstrual cycle. The menstruation period is a normal physical process of a woman's body. Adolescent girls are often not knowledgeable about reproductive health, including menstrual hygiene management, which can be due to socio-cultural barriers in which they grow up. The present study aimed to explore the knowledge, perception, practices and experience of adolescent girls (10-19 years) regarding menstruation and menstrual hygiene. It also examines the impact of menstruation on various aspects of their social life. Mythic religious interpretation and taboo about menstruation is leading to social psychological and physiologic vulnerability for women in India particularly in rural areas. Lack of knowledge regarding menstruation among young girls results in hampering at least four Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), i.e., gender equality, good health and well-being, clean water and sanitation and quality education. (Smrutisikta Thapa, 2021).

Review of Literature

1. The study found that the age at menarche was associated with menstrual hygiene practices, cultural taboos, and sanitary practices among Dongria Kondh

adolescent girls. The findings highlighted the influence of traditional beliefs and social practices on menstrual health management among this PVTG community (Das and Rajesh K. Gautam, 2022) ^[14].

2. This study basically focused on rural Kenyan schoolgirls' perceptions and practices related to menstruation, yet the complications and challenges that can accompany such an event have been understudied, specifically in resource-poor settings. As interventions aim to improve female attendance in schools, it is important to explore how menstruation is perceived and navigated by girls in the school setting. (Shannon A. McMahon *et al.*, 2011) ^[15].
3. The research focuses on the Gond tribal community is known for patriarchal norms that govern social and communal life, and these do impact menstrual health. This study aims to explore diverse cultural practices related to menstruation within the Gond tribal community of Dhanora to understand how these practices influence menstrual health with respect to pain, discomfort, emotional well-being, and social interactions. Used a qualitative approach with in-depth interviews among 17 Gond tribal women and 3 healthcare providers. Diverse perspectives were captured using convenience sampling followed by a purposive selection of informants. (Dr Chunoti Umaji Punwatkar 2024) ^[16].
4. The study reveals that many schools provide basic menstrual hygiene resources, but inconsistencies in essential supplies and persistent social stigma significantly impact students' comfort and participation during menstruation at school. These challenges lead to reduced attendance, limited physical activity, and social withdrawal, highlighting the need for integrated strategies that address both infrastructural gaps and cultural barriers to improve menstrual health management and support girls' full engagement in school. (Durva Dhok, 2025) ^[3].

5. The study shows that there are unique challenges and disparities in women's health, particularly in the domains of menstrual health, pregnancy, and post-pregnancy care. Also, this study explores the demographic and socioeconomic factors affecting Gond women's health, focusing on menstrual hygiene and life stages before, during, and after pregnancy. In addition, focus groups and qualitative interviews were used to acquire greater knowledge of the socioeconomic and social factors impacting these health-distinctive characteristics. (Sakshi Singh *et al.*, 2024)^[9].
6. The study found that rural adolescent girls, particularly those from the Kora tribal population, experienced challenges in menstrual hygiene management due to limited awareness, cultural beliefs, and menstrual taboos. It highlighted the need for improved menstrual health education and culturally appropriate awareness programmes among tribal adolescents (Ganguly *et al.*, 2025)^[4].

Objective

1. To study the perceptions and Anticipation of Kandha adolescent girls.
2. To identify the community's traditional and cultural practices related to menarche.

Methods

The study adopted a descriptive research design to understand perceptions, expectations, feelings and traditional practices related to menarche among the Kandha adolescent girls in Odisha. The number of 59 girls aged 10-19 years were selected using purposive sampling. Face-to-face interviewing and observation were used to collect the data. The interview included questions on awareness of menarche, what was expected of it, the feelings that arose, where she had heard information about the experience, how her family supported her, and culturally prescribed practices. The researcher used an observation tool to get insight into the social and cultural context around the onset of menarche among the Kandha tribe. The collected information was systematically arranged and analysed according to the purpose of the study to gain insight into the experiences and traditional practices of Kandha adolescent girls. Secondary data were collected from articles, journals, books, etc.

Findings

Traditional beliefs and cultural practices

Menstruation among the Kandha community is closely connected with traditional beliefs, cultural values, and customary practices. The onset of menarche is understood not only as a biological change but also as a culturally significant stage in the life of a tribal girl. During the menstrual period, girls and women are believed to follow certain traditional restrictions. They may be restricted from entering religious places, kitchen areas, and other spaces considered important or sacred within the household. They may also be instructed not to touch certain household belongings or items used by other family members. In some families, menstruating girls and women are expected to stay in a separate or designated place away from the main living area of the house. Another practice is that the menstruating woman may not enter the kitchen to prepare or collect food. Instead, other family members provide food to her, and she

may be expected to eat separately from the rest of the family. These practices are maintained through community traditions and are generally learned from mothers, grandmothers, female relatives, and other elders. Oral communication in the community's tribal language plays an important role in passing these beliefs from one generation to another. The restrictions are also associated with fears of negative consequences if the customary rules are violated. Community members believe that breaking these practices could bring Bad Luck, illness, death, or other problems to the family or their community. Also, snakes, scorpions, and disease reflect the fears and explanations associated with these traditional beliefs. Such beliefs can strongly influence how girls understand and anticipate menarche. Before and after menarche, adolescent girls may learn not only about menstruation itself but also about the social rules and behavioural expectations associated with it. Therefore, the experience of menarche among Kandha adolescents should be understood within the broader context of tribal culture, family socialisation, oral tradition, and community beliefs. The use of tribal language in communicating these practices is particularly important because it helps preserve cultural knowledge and transmit traditional understandings of menstruation across generations.

Rituals Performed after Menarche

In the Kui language, the time of onset of the first menstruation is known as "Laoate" and it's regarded as an important intermediate stage of every female's life. The post-menarche activities mirror the cultural values, traditional beliefs and community practices related to the transition from childhood to adolescence. Once menarche is observed, the girl is observed to be in seclusion for seven days. During this time, she is expected to stay in the area, not leave it and not be able to meet with the male members of the community. She will also be required to adhere to certain guidelines for personal care and use or touching of household items. Culturally defined rules about menstruation are evident in the disuse of items like iron, clothes and water that other members of the family use. These practices are passed on by family members and elders and are learned from one generation to the next, orally and through traditional knowledge. The girl uses specific rules during the time of hiding place in regard to personal hygiene and movement. The provisions for bathing and changing her clothes suggest that menstrual hygiene is highly controlled at the household and community level. After the seven days, there's a big ritual. In the early morning, the girl (budi) and mother (aya) go to Gadhua Ghat (Gada) to take a ritual bath of (Siru mina). The ritual bath is an important part of the period of privacy, and that the girl should be prepared to return to her normal social and family life. She is then given a bath after which turmeric (mina) is massaged into her body; she is then dressed in a new dress or a new Saree (Puni angi), and bangles (kanchag and chudi) are put on her. Traditionally, these are handed down by her maternal uncle and aunt (Ma'mu and ama), indicating that the ritual of menarche involves the maternal family. After the ritual bath and dressing, the girl goes back home and is blessed by the tribal gods and goddesses and by the older members of the family (mai itu luku) of the community. This practice demonstrates the connection between menarche, family relationships, spiritual beliefs, and community recognition. It is also a ritual involving group participation of the

relatives and the members of their village. They have a feast (boji) these days for all the members of the community and their relatives. Food preparation and roasting of a pig, sharing the food among all family members and the community and gift-giving to the girl demonstrate that menarche is not just a physical occurrence but is also a socialised event.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study found that the onset of menarche among adolescent girls of the Kandha community is not only a biological event but is also considered a significant social-cultural transition. The study revealed that family guidance, community traditions, oral knowledge, and culturally accepted beliefs play a crucial role in shaping the perceptions and expectations of adolescent girls (aged between 10 and 19 years) related to menarche. Women, in particular mothers/grandmothers and female elders, have a significant role in the passing on of knowledge and practices associated with menstruation. The results show there are still some traditional taboos that affect the experience of menstruation for the Kandha girls. These involve entry to religious buildings and kitchens, touching household items, contact with others or separation during menstruation. Practices are sustained by cultural traditions and beliefs regarding possible negative outcomes of breaking the customary rules. The study also brings to the forefront the cultural significance of the Laoate ritual after the onset of menstruation. After seven days of privacy, the ritual bath of Siru Mina is performed at Gadhua Ghat, turmeric is applied to the body, new clothes are donned, blessings are sought from elders and deities, and a community feast takes place. These practices illustrate that menarche is a collective experience, and that it is recognised as a transition from childhood to adolescence, and that it involves relatives, family, spiritual beliefs, as well as community participation. Overall, the results indicate that menstrual awareness programmes for Kandha adolescents should be culturally sensitive and equipped with accurate information regarding menstruation and menstrual health. Culturally responsive education for girls with family, community elders, schools and health workers, can contribute to girls' confidence and preparedness in understanding menstruation.

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