



Research article

Blood and Belief: Utopias and Dystopias of Menstrual Rites and Domestic Morality Through Lived Experiences of Bengali Hindu Women in Kolkata

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Abstract

Menstruation, along with other domestic moral femininity, since its embodiment attains a socio-cultural meaning and symbolic significance that often tends to overshadow the scientific explanation in society. Despite being a biological phenomenon, experiences of menstruation have social overtones. This paper examines the intersections of menstruation, domestic morality, and religious ritual within Bengali Hindu middle-class households, foregrounding how the female body becomes a contested site of purity, stigma, and moral order. Drawing on ethnographic narratives and feminist theory, the study examines how rituals such as *Ritu Kāla Samskār* (puberty rites), *Ritu Shuddhi* (purification after menstruation), and practices of *ashaucha* (ritual impurity) translate Brahmanical ideals of *paap* (sin) and *punya* (virtue) into embodied experience. While these rituals celebrate fertility and the transition to womanhood, they also enforce forms of seclusion, food taboos, and spatial restrictions that bind women to ideals of chastity, modesty, and maternal duty. In this sense, menstrual rituals produce a paradoxical embodiment, i.e. utopian in celebrating fertility and womanhood, yet dystopian in enforcing seclusion, modesty, and self-surveillance. Yet, women are not passive subjects of these moral codes; they often negotiate ritual responsibility through selective adherence, reinterpretation, or subtle resistance, thereby reworking the meaning of religious observance in urban middle-class contexts. By framing ritual purity as both a mechanism of control and a space of desire, agency, and gender performance, this study shows how the female body embodies the paradox of reverence and restriction, utopia and dystopia, within the lived politics of belief in Bengal.

Keywords: Menstruation, Ritual purity, Domestic morality, Gender performance, Bengali Hindu women, Agency.



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Introduction

Religious narratives surrounding menstruation, virginity, and domestic conduct have long structured the moral order of Hindu society, transforming the body into a moral text that must be read, disciplined, and purified. However, owing to the patriarchal structure underlying religious practices, the female body emerges as a privileged site of ritual politics, simultaneously celebrated and stigmatized. Again, dystopia, as mentioned in the title of this paper, is often imagined as a bleak, estranged future, a mirror held up to contemporary anxieties around power, control, and social decay. It is often regarded as "utopia's twentieth-century doppelgänger," most vividly represented through the genres of science fiction and political fiction. The concept of *dystopia*, though often associated with speculative futures, provides a productive lens to interpret these embodied moral orders. Here, *dystopia* operates through the regulation of desire, surveillance of conduct, and internalization of authority; mechanisms that parallel the functioning of religious morality. In this sense, religion itself can be seen as a historical antecedent of dystopian logic, where divine or communal authority justifies continuous bodily surveillance, policing of sexuality, and social conformity. Conversely, *utopia* is imagined as the ideal moral order; offering the promise of purity, fertility, and spiritual elevation, often realized through the disciplined female body. Religion, therefore, can be understood as a historical precursor to dystopian logic where divine authority justifies constant surveillance of the self, the categorization of bodies into pure and impure, and the enforcement of conformity through communal sanctions. Religion, thus, does not exist outside dystopia; it often becomes the very ground on which gendered dystopias are enacted, especially through practices that govern sexuality, bodily conduct, and virtue. Within Bengali Hindu middle-class households, menstruation becomes a key site where these utopian and dystopian logics intersect.

Hindu conceptions of sin are more relational, contextual, and cosmological. At its core, "sin" occupies a complex and fluid space in Hindu philosophy and theology. In classical Hindu texts such as the *Manusmriti*, the *Mahabharata*, and various *Puranas*, 'sin' is often associated with physical impurity, moral lapse, or social transgression, especially in relation to food practices, caste boundaries, sexual conduct, and ritual failures. The *Manusmriti* (5.66–5.67) explicitly instructs that "a woman during her menses shall be considered impure for three nights; she must not apply collyrium or oil, nor bathe until purification," and that "he who approaches a menstruating woman will lose his wisdom and longevity" (Doniger & Smith, 1991, p. 136). These injunctions associate menstruation with ritual impurity and moral lapse, equating physical contact with spiritual pollution. Similarly, the *Mahabharata* (Anushasana Parva, 13.84.41–42) defines sin as "that which defiles the inner self through unrighteous action," including violations of food and sexual conduct, thus framing impurity as both physical and ethical (Ganguli, 1883–1896/2004). The *Garuda Purana* (2.22.14–16) reinforces this moral cosmology, warning that "those who eat impure food, who touch the unclean, or who neglect ritual observance, accumulate *paap* that binds the soul to rebirth" (Tagare, 1982). Such passages reveal that sin in Hindu dharmic literature is not merely metaphysical but materially enacted and produced

through food, touch, and bodily substance. Acts like eating forbidden foods, crossing caste boundaries, violating menstrual taboos, or neglecting domestic duty are thus believed to generate tangible karmic residue, ensuring that moral order is maintained through ritual discipline.

The term *moral domesticity* in this study refers to the ways in which the household functions not merely as a private sphere but as a moral and ritual institution. Within Bengali Hindu middle-class contexts, domestic practices such as cooking, fasting, menstrual segregation, and spatial restrictions are imbued with religious significance and governed by the logic of *paap* (sin) and *punya* (virtue). These acts are not trivial routines but ritualized performances through which moral femininity is produced, sustained, and transmitted across generations. Drawing on Foucault's (1977) notion of disciplinary power, the domestic space becomes a site of micro-surveillance, where women internalize norms of purity and regulate their own conduct. At the same time, following Douglas (1966), these practices can be seen as symbolic boundaries that maintain social and religious order by distinguishing between the pure and the polluted. Thus, *moral domesticity* denotes both the everyday regulation of the female body and the broader moral order sustained through domestic ritual labour.

Rituals within Bengali Hinduism play a central role in producing and reinforcing gendered subjectivities. These rituals serve as both symbolic systems and disciplinary mechanisms, constructing normative femininity through religious affect and visual culture. As Lina Fruzzetti demonstrates in *The Gift of a Virgin: Women, Marriage, and Ritual in a Bengali Society* (1982), marriage and lifecycle rituals such as *Ritu Kala Samskara* and bridal gifting encode the idealized image of womanhood as chaste, modest, and prepared for reproductive duty. These rituals produce normative femininity by combining religious affect (emotional and moral weight) with visual culture (ornaments, clothing, bodily gestures), reinforcing the belief that a woman's value lies in her bodily purity and ritual conformity (Fruzzetti 1982).

Ethnographic accounts of puberty rituals in Bengal and Bengali women situate *initiation rites* as a liminal ceremony that celebrates fertility while simultaneously circumscribing the girl's body within rules of seclusion, modesty, and pollution. This paper explores how menstrual rites and domestic morality function as utopias and dystopias of embodiment in Hindu contexts. Puberty rituals such as *Tuloni Biya* are widely observed to mark menarche, celebrate fertility, while simultaneously circumscribing the girl's body through seclusion, modesty, and codes of pollution (Das, 2018). In parallel, within Bengali middle-class households, everyday acts of cooking, fasting, menstrual restriction, or spatial segregation translate *paap* (sin) into embodied practice, naturalizing religious morality within the rhythms of domestic life. Menstrual blood, celebrated for its reproductive potential yet stigmatized as a pollutant and sin, is embedded in everyday gestures of discipline that reveal how belief is inscribed on women's bodies as a form of moral governance.

Further, in the context of the Indian Bengali middle-class, everyday acts of cooking, fasting, menstrual restriction, or spatial segregation translate sin into embodied practice,

naturalizing religious morality within the rhythms of domestic life. This study positions the female body as a living archive of disciplinary and symbolic processes: a body acted upon by religious norms, but also one that negotiates, resists, and occasionally subverts them. To perform gender or express sexuality in a religious context is to inhabit the fine line between moral utopia and embodied dystopia. The household, especially in Hindu middle-class contexts, becomes not merely a private space but a ritual and moral institution, with women as its spiritual custodians.

While puberty rituals and domestic codes of sin may seem culturally distinct, they are bound by a shared Brahmanical logic that places the female body at the heart of ritual order. Both transform biological processes into moral categories: menstrual blood as a signifier of promise and pollution, domestic acts as markers of purity and discipline. Rather than discrete traditions, these represent parallel articulations of a broader religious framework in which purity, pollution, and gendered morality are constantly negotiated. Reading them together highlights how Brahmanical discourse sustains moral utopias of disciplined femininity while producing lived dystopias of exclusion, stigma, and surveillance.

The embodied experiences of menarche and menstruation acquire socio-cultural meaning and symbolic weight that often eclipse their scientific interpretation within society. Despite being a biological phenomenon, experiences of menstruation have always been deeply social and cultural as well as political in some scenarios. This paper argues how knowledge itself becomes a cultural tool to impose and socially generate 'womanhood', relying essentially upon the female body and agency. It is primarily an ethnographic exploration of the lived experiences of the Hindu Middle-Class women of Bengal. By juxtaposing menstrual rites with domestic morality, this study demonstrates that ritual purity is not static but contested, adapted, and sometimes resisted. Women, positioned as custodians of belief, transmit these codes across generations even as they modify them to fit shifting cultural contexts. Religion here is not only theology or doctrine but an embodied politics that sustains caste hierarchies, gendered moralities, and social surveillance within both domestic and communal spheres. Eventually, this paper also reflects on the identity negotiation by these Bengali Hindu Middle-Class women of Bengal, dwelling upon shared positions as both socio-cultural products of the system as well as 'modern' (working), the educated women of contemporary times.

Menarche occurs at various ages for every girl. A girl's first period, or menarche, is widely honoured across the country. Additionally, every culture has its own customs for embracing these biological events. Every ritual that takes place has religious roots, and religious rituals are traditionally performed in conjunction with these significant life events. Scholars are of the view that attitudes of reductionism of women to their ability to reproduce are promoted and reiterated with the celebration of rituals (Paige & Paige, 2023). However, this does not suggest that rituals are regressive in nature because many times it has been found that people find their own rituals culturally uplifting (Dutta et al., 2023). Observing such rituals has nothing to do with education or scientific temperament or rationality because often such rituals also denote one's adherence to or collective

conscience of one's socio-cultural standpoint. The collective conscience is upheld strictly by certain mediators of knowledge who reproduce and pass on the knowledge to the members of society.

Literature Review

The theoretical foundation of this study draws primarily on Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power and Mary Douglas's analysis of purity and pollution, both of which provide powerful tools to interrogate the gendered regulation of the female body in religious contexts. Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), argues that power operates through diffuse mechanisms of observation, normalization, and internal discipline rather than overt coercion (Foucault 1977). Within religious traditions, these mechanisms are embodied in ritual practices, moral taboos, and communal expectations that shape women's behaviour and bodily conduct. The female body, especially when marked by menstruation, sexual activity, or deviation from modesty, becomes a focal point of moral surveillance regulated not only by external religious authority but also by internalized self-discipline. Mary Douglas's seminal work, *Purity and Danger* (1966), complements this framework by showing how concepts of pollution and impurity are socially constructed boundaries used to maintain moral and symbolic order (Douglas 1966).

Among literary fictions, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) remains a foundational text in feminist interpretations of dystopia, where the female body becomes a site of intense regulation, reproductive control, and state-sponsored morality. Atwood's speculative narrative envisions a theocratic regime that institutionalizes virginity, modesty, and ritualized purity as a form of governance that echoes real-world practices in many patriarchal and religious systems. In the context of Bengali Hinduism, the ideals of purity, virginity, and sacred femininity similarly create a dual framework of utopian womanhood and dystopian deviance, enacted through both symbolic rituals and embodied norms. Similarly, Zygmunt Bauman's concept of "liquid modernity" suggests that contemporary dystopias are not rigidly totalitarian but rather marked by fluid forms of precarity, where individuals are constantly exposed to instability under neoliberal capitalism (Bauman 2000).

Mrinalini Chakravorty (2015), in her chapter "Of Dystopias and Deliriums: The Millennial Novel in India," highlights how the contemporary Anglophone novel in India is predominantly dystopian, marking a distinct trend in which dystopia becomes the dominant mode through which present-day Indian fiction engages with the symptoms and realities of "millennial capitalism" (Chaudhuri, 2015).

Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* (2005) complicates liberal notions of resistance by showing how bodily practices of modesty and ritual observance, often interpreted as oppressive, may also be experienced as forms of agency within religious traditions. This insight is particularly relevant to the study of Hindu menstrual and domestic rituals, where women are not merely passive recipients of Brahmanical codes but active interpreters and transmitters of them. In the South Asian context, research on puberty rituals has highlighted the ambivalent positioning of menstruating girls. Das (2018), in her study of

Tuloni Biya, documents how Assamese girls negotiate the transition into womanhood through ceremonial practices that both celebrate fertility and impose restrictions of seclusion, modesty, and ritual labor.

These findings underscore how rituals transform biological processes into moral categories, inscribing gender roles through embodied practice. Similarly, ethnographic studies of Bengali Hindu domesticity point to how *paap* (sin) is internalized through everyday acts of cooking, fasting, and spatial segregation, situating women as custodians of moral purity within the home.

The disciplining of the female body in religious and domestic contexts has also been linked to broader structures of violence. Banerjee, P. (2013) argues that witch-hunts in India represent extreme manifestations of patriarchal and cultural control, where accusations of impurity and deviance legitimize public punishment and exclusion. This connects the seemingly ordinary regulation of menstruation and domestic morality with the extraordinary violence inflicted on women whose bodies or behaviours disrupt communal ideals. Ray, A (2018), drawing on Foucault, extends this argument by highlighting how confessional subjectivity and pastoral power regulate sexuality and morality, producing compliant subjects through the internalization of surveillance. Together, these studies reinforce the view that religious rituals are not neutral customs but mechanisms that discipline, stigmatize, and occasionally endanger women's lives.

Tanika Sarkar (2001) situates Hindu domestic rituals within a nationalist framework, where women's purity becomes synonymous with community honour and religious identity. Such insights resonate with Sarkar's broader argument that the Hindu wife is imagined as both sacred and sacrificial, embodying utopian ideals of virtue while being subjected to dystopian restrictions on agency. When read alongside Douglas's (1966) theory of pollution, these accounts illuminate how ritual boundaries uphold not only symbolic order but also caste and gender hierarchies.

Ethnographers such as Leela Dube have highlighted how Hindu conceptions of womanhood are deeply tied to reproductive purity and domesticity. Dube shows that the ideal Hindu woman is not merely biologically female, but one who adheres to religious expectations of modesty, sexual restraint, and moral virtue; qualities often enforced through lifecycle rituals and kinship norms. She argues that Hindu ideas of womanhood are profoundly linked to patrilineal kinship systems and reproductive control. A woman's sexual purity, especially before marriage, functions not only as a moral virtue but as a means of ensuring caste purity, lineage legitimacy, and family honour (Dube 17–18). For instance, while the womb and fertility are revered within Hindu cosmology, the same female body becomes a source of danger during menstruation or sexual transgression. Thus, purity codes become mechanisms through which women are both venerated and regulated, often simultaneously (Dube 2001). In the Bengali context, rituals such as *Ritu Kala Samskara* (celebrating menarche), *Kumari Puja* (worship of the virgin girl), and *Sindoor Khela* (married women's fertility celebration) illustrate how Hindu religiosity celebrates femininity primarily when it aligns with heteronormative ideals of chastity, fertility, and self-control. Her work reveals how rituals surrounding menarche, marriage,

and widowhood are sites where the female body is symbolically encoded with religious and social meaning. Veena Das (1996) adds another layer to this discourse by highlighting the moments of bodily transition (puberty, menstruation, childbirth). Das argues that moments of bodily transition, such as puberty, menstruation, and childbirth, are key points when religious rituals intervene most significantly. These 'liminal moments' are when the female body appears unstable or "out of place," requiring purification and symbolic reintegration into the social order (Das 1996, pp. 67–91).

Brahminical codes are well mentioned in Dharma literature. And one of the most prominent writers of Dharma literature is the one written by Manusmriti, which offers a detailed version of the ritual observance and ritual purity of Brahmins and their way of maintaining their caste purity. Manusmriti's discussion of menstruation as representative of Hinduism's normative discourse on the subject (Cohen, 2020; Pathak, 2019). The text explicitly codes menstruating women as impure and comparable to those of "fallen" or "low" caste. For instance, Manusmriti 5.66–5.67 instructs, "If he touches a menstruating woman, a fallen man, or a corpse, he shall bathe with his clothes on," and further declares, "A woman is impure for three nights during her monthly course; she must not bathe until the fourth day, when she becomes pure by bathing as prescribed" (Olivelle, 2005, p. 103). These injunctions equate menstruation with ritual pollution and establish avoidance protocols, where the menstruating woman is to be excluded from domestic and religious activities, and her touch or proximity is considered contaminating. Manusmriti 5.85–5.86 further warns, "If a man approaches a woman during her menses, he will fall into hell for three years," while asserting that abstaining from such contact brings men "long life and intelligence" (Olivelle, 2005, p. 104; Pathak, 2019, p. 237).

Manusmriti further elaborates the idea of ritual contamination through contact, extending impurity beyond menstruation to other bodily and social states- "if he touches a menstruating woman, a fallen man, or a corpse, he shall bathe with his clothes on" (Manusmriti 5.85–5.86), and similarly, "if he encounters an outcaste, a woman who has recently given birth, or anyone who has touched a corpse, he must cleanse himself by bathing" (Olivelle, 2005, p. 104; Pathak, 2019, p. 237). These verses explicitly position menstruation within a hierarchy of pollutants, where contact with women's bodily processes is equated with contact with death or social defilement. As Ganguly and Satpati (2021) note, menstruation becomes one among many substances and socially constructed hierarchies that threaten Brahminical status and ritual purity, reinforcing the caste-gender nexus that underpins the Manusmriti moral order. On one hand, periods in many cultures carry a pure-impure aspect to them. The purity or celebratory aspect of periods arises from the premise that the period blood nourishes the embryo for fertility purposes. The defilement status or impure status of period blood is because women's bodies have always been looked at with disdain (Tan et al., 2017, p. xx). Thus, women are made to engage in a variety of normative body practices that manage and hide their 'disgusting' bodies.

Interestingly, on the other hand, there exist notions where a menstruating goddess is worshipped and regarded with intense power during those days of the deity. The beliefs

about menstruating goddesses in many parts of India, according to historian N. N. Bhattacharyya (1999), support this idea of divine menstruation as renewal rather than pollution. Mother Earth (Dharti Ma) is said to “sleep” for a week every month in Punjab, where she is revered. Similarly, goddess temples are shut down in several regions of the Deccan following the Navaratri so that the goddess may rest and rejuvenate. The rites associated with the goddess’s menstrual cycle are still observed during the monsoon season at the Kamakhya temple in Assam and in parts of Odisha (Apffel-Marglin & Jean, 2020, p. 280).

These are also indications of a paradox, that within the same civilizational framework that stigmatizes menstruation as polluting, there also exists a sacred counterpart where the goddess’s menstrual blood is seen as generative and cosmologically potent- a site of renewal, fertility, and power (Bhattacharyya, 1999; Apffel-Marglin & Jean, 2020). In contrast to the Brahmanical view of menstruation as defilement, Tantric traditions interpret the female body as a locus of cosmic energy (shakti) and regeneration. As Bhattacharyya (1999) observes, Tantric philosophy does not stigmatize female sexuality or menstrual blood but treats them as manifestations of the goddess’s creative principle. Within this cosmology, menstruation symbolizes the cyclical renewal of the universe, a process of both dissolution and rebirth. The worship of menstruating goddesses such as Kamakhya in Assam reflects this worldview, where the goddess’s menstrual flow (Ambubachi Mela) is celebrated as the descent of fertility and life force into the earth. Bhattacharyya (1999) emphasizes that such Tantric reinterpretations of bodily processes subvert patriarchal constructions of impurity and affirm the sanctity of the female generative body.

Research Questions

The aim of this research paper is to understand menstruation rites and domestic moral femininity ritual among Bengali middle-class women. It dwells upon how these women perceive the rituals and make meaning behind such celebrations. Additionally, the research paper also seeks to address the societal taboos (if any) surrounding the menstruation rituals, their sense of agency and bodily autonomy regarding performing domestic femininity through religious rituals. Therefore, the research questions here include:

- How do menstrual rites and domestic practices of *paap* (sin) regulate and construct the female body as a site of religious and moral order?
- In what ways can these practices be interpreted as “utopias” of idealized femininity and “dystopias” of bodily discipline, exclusion, or stigma?
- What broader insights about Brahmanical patriarchy, purity, and moral regulation can be drawn from juxtaposing puberty rituals with Bengali middle-class domestic religiosity?

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative and interpretive methodology, combining textual analysis, ethnographic data, and feminist theoretical frameworks to analyse the regulation of the female body through ritual. A thematic approach is used to trace how concepts of purity, sin, and surveillance converge across both menstrual rites and domestic practices, not as isolated traditions but as parallel articulations of a shared Brahmanical logic. Situated within the feminist sociology of religion, the research emphasizes women's embodied negotiations of ritual discipline while reflexively acknowledging the positionality of the researcher as a cultural insider.

The research draws upon ten semi-structured qualitative interviews complemented by participant observation in domestic and ritual contexts, employing ethnographic tools such as narrative, observation, and interviews to foreground women's lived experiences of ritual discipline. The study was conducted between January and April 2025 in urban Kolkata, West Bengal, India, among Bengali Hindu middle-class women belonging predominantly to upper caste (Brahmin and Kayasth) households. All participants were women aged between 20 and 35 years, representing an emerging generation negotiating between traditional religious observance and contemporary urban life. Participants included working professionals, students, and homemakers, all of whom identified as practicing Hindus. The interviews were conducted primarily in Bengali and later translated into English by the researcher. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and explored participants lived experiences of menstruation, ritual purity, domestic morality, and their negotiation of these norms within urban middle-class households.

In addition to interviews, observation was carried out during household and community rituals such as Durga Puja, Lakshmi Puja, and Purnima fasting days, where practices surrounding menstrual segregation and food restrictions were observed. The data were analysed using a thematic interpretive framework grounded in phenomenology and feminist sociology, focusing on how embodiment and religiosity intersect in everyday life. Ethical approval was sought in accordance with standard social research guidelines, and all participants provided informed consent prior to inclusion in the study. These ethnographic materials are further situated within textual and archival sources on purity politics, witch-hunts, and Brahmanical patriarchy (Banerjee, 2013; Douglas, 1966; Ray, 2018; Sarkar, 2001).

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight how menstrual rites and domestic morality inscribe the female body as a contested site of purity, discipline, and belief. By juxtaposing puberty rituals and everyday domestic practices, the discussion unpacks the multiple layers in which women navigate religious norms and moral surveillance, while also losing or reclaiming their agency over religion as well as bodily autonomy. The discussion shall deal with a few major themes that emerge from the narratives:

1. Utopias of Purity, Dystopias of Stigma

Ethnographic narratives from Bengali Hindu middle-class households reveal how menstruation remains a complex site of moral celebration and social regulation. Puberty rituals, while outwardly joyous, operate as mechanisms of gendered discipline that encode both utopian ideals of fertility and dystopian realities of surveillance. When a girl attains menarche, she symbolically enters the moral universe of womanhood. Her body, marked by blood, becomes both sacred and suspect- revered for its reproductive potential yet immediately inscribed with rules of purity, modesty, and control. One respondent recalled how her first menstruation was commemorated with ritual bathing and gift exchange, followed by a period of seclusion where she was forbidden to enter the kitchen or touch utensils. "It was meant to be a celebration," she said, "but I mostly remember being watched...everyone telling me what to do, what to eat, where to sit." This sense of joyful confinement captures the paradox central to menstrual rituals: the simultaneous production of feminine sanctity and restriction.

Within more traditional Brahmin households, respondents recalled the persistence of ritual seclusion following menarche. One 24-year-old participant described her first period vividly:

When I first got my period, they kept me in a separate room for four days. I was told not to touch the kitchen, not to enter the puja room. My grandmother said I must eat only fruits, milk, and soaked rice to 'stay clean' inside and out.

Such recollections illustrate how menstrual discipline is framed not only as physical regulation but as moral pedagogy. An early initiation into the codes of purity and caste respectability. During this time, the body is treated as *ashaucha* (ritually impure) yet paradoxically celebrated as a marker of fertility and divine potential. While the symbolic order of menstruation remains constant, its expression has become more flexible in contemporary urban settings. A 27-year-old Assistant Professor (Bengali Brahmin) living independently in South Kolkata shared:

When I'm living alone, I don't follow all the rules. But the moment I go home, I automatically follow everything again. It's not exactly compulsion; more like a habit that defines who we are. We don't have extremely strict isolation. But Ma still tells me not to cook or go to the temple. She says it's just tradition, not impurity, however, the meaning feels the same.

Her account reflects a form of "selective adherence", where ritual compliance becomes situational and negotiated. Boundaries once enforced by elders are now internalized as personal ethics, revealing how religious conformity adapts to modern autonomy.

In earlier research, the researcher examined how menstruation becomes central to identity formation, where blood is simultaneously stigmatized and valorised as a marker of womanhood (Ghosh, 2025). Building on that work, this study extends those insights. Recent findings reaffirm that the utopian promise of fertility continues to coexist with dystopian restrictions on mobility, social participation, and bodily autonomy. Several respondents recounted that their entry into menstruation was not only a biological transition but also a moral initiation. One participant, 24, an undergrad student (Bengali

Brahmin), reflected: "After my first period, Ma told me, 'You're now responsible for your purity.' I didn't understand it then, but it meant I had entered a new kind of supervision." This experience echoes the argument in Ghosh (2025), where women in similar domestic spaces described their everyday ritual acts- such as cooking, fasting, or avoiding the temple during menstruation as "moral rehearsals" of sin and virtue. The earlier study documented how women, often under the gaze of mothers or mothers-in-law, internalized the distinction between *paap* (sin) and *punya* (virtue) as bodily disciplines. In the present study, those same moral codes persist, though reinterpreted by a younger generation negotiating between modern education and religious inheritance.

Respondents have further indicated that their engagement with religion was experienced less as a form of spiritual freedom and more as a regime of bodily discipline. As the researcher has argued that ritual responsibility within Bengali Hindu households is stratified by age and marital status: married women often undertook elaborate *pujas*, while unmarried daughters performed simplified versions, reflecting a hierarchy of moral and ritual labour. Although contemporary urban, middle-class societies appear to exhibit fewer everyday restrictions around menstruation, these prohibitions resurface with marked intensity during significant ritual occasions such as *Lakshmi Puja*, *Kali Puja*, *Durga Puja*, *Purnima* (full moon), and *Amavasya* (new moon). This cyclical reassertion of menstrual restrictions demonstrates how religious morality continues to discipline women's bodies, particularly at moments when communal ritual purity is deemed most essential (Ghosh, 2025).

The narratives reveal that women's ritualized bodies are imagined simultaneously as utopian and dystopian sites. On the one hand, chastity and fertility are elevated as markers of ideal womanhood, ensuring the purity of caste lineage and reinforcing women's symbolic role as custodians of Brahminical supremacy. This utopian vision of virtuous femininity celebrates menstruation as the gateway to womanhood and reproductive potential. Yet, the same ideals generate dystopian realities of surveillance, restriction, and stigma, where women are subjected to segregation, food taboos, and hierarchical ritual responsibilities that constrain their autonomy. The female body thus becomes a paradoxical site- revered for its reproductive promise while disciplined into silence and submission through rituals that bind chastity to purity and womanhood to moral obligation.

2. Moral Domesticity and the Embodiment of Sin (Paap)

In Bengali Hindu middle-class households, the regulation of domestic life is inseparable from the regulation of morality. What appears as everyday practice- cooking, fasting, observing food taboos, or adhering to menstrual segregation constitutes moral domesticity. Here, the household does not function merely as a private sphere but as a moral and ritual institution, where women's bodies become vessels of religious discipline and custodianship. The author's earlier work on Bengali domestic religiosity (Ghosh, 2025) has shown how *paap* (sin) is translated into embodied practice within kitchens, *puja* rooms, and intimate domestic spaces, creating a constant negotiation between ritual codes and women's lived realities. Through this lens, moral domesticity can be

understood as a technology of everyday discipline. Drawing on Foucault's (1977) notion of micro-power, domestic rituals inscribe codes of purity and sin upon women's conduct, producing subjects who internalize surveillance and self-regulate according to religious expectations. In this way, domesticity itself becomes moralized, producing utopias of virtuous femininity when properly observed and dystopias of stigma or exclusion when breached.

When asked how they would define the experience of *paap* (sin), most respondents described it less in theological terms and more as an affective register of "guilt" or "fear." This fear was not oriented toward an abstract afterlife but toward immediate judgment, social sanction, and moral policing within the community. As the author has argued in her earlier work (2025), the regulatory power of religious practice lies not only in doctrine but in the gendered socialization that embeds restrictions as naturalized "don'ts" for women (Ghosh, 2025). The making of a "religious woman" is measured not by spiritual reflection but by the rigor with which she adheres to ritual codes—particularly prohibitions. Any failure to adhere quickly marks her as a "sinner": a menstruating woman who inadvertently enters a sacred space, a devotee who touches deities in unwashed clothes, a widow present at an auspicious occasion, a woman who fails to conceive at a child's initiation ritual, or one who neglects to wear "decent" clothing or cover her head appropriately. These examples point to how constructions of sin are overwhelmingly tethered to women's bodily autonomy and comportment, situating the female body as the privileged site of moral scrutiny and discipline (Ghosh, 2025).

For instance, an unmarried respondent in her twenties (Bengali Brahmin), IT professional, shared that while she considers herself non-religious, she still refrains from touching the household shrine during her period because,

It feels wrong... not because God will punish me, but because it's how I was raised. Similarly, a 33-year-old married woman, homemaker (Kayasth), explained that she experiences menstruation as a cyclical boundary, both physical and emotional:

Those four days make me aware that I'm different, set apart. Sometimes it's peaceful—an excuse to rest. But it also reminds me that I'm still not entirely free.

These responses resonate with the ethnographic findings in *Translating Sin* (Ghosh, 2025), where women articulated *paap* as a lived effect rather than a theological idea, experienced through guilt, self-surveillance, and bodily regulation. Across both studies, the female body emerges as a moral text, simultaneously sanctified and suspect, shaped by familial pedagogy and ritual repetition.

An elaborate set of restrictions governs women's behaviour during menstruation, many of which are paradoxically linked to practices involving water. Activities such as hair-washing, bathing, or swimming are often discouraged, perceived as physically harmful during this "vulnerable" period. Women are instead encouraged to take an elaborate purificatory bath only upon the completion of menstruation, symbolically marking the restoration of ritual purity. These taboos are not only medicalized but also embedded in broader concerns of social exposure. Activities like swimming or communal bathing, which may require tight-fitting clothing, heighten anxieties of disclosure, such as revealing the

use of a sanitary pad invokes the fear of menstrual blood becoming visible. The resulting shame underscores how restrictions around water intersect with questions of bodily surveillance and gendered modesty. As Newton (2016, p. 865) observes in her study of adolescent schoolgirls, everyday discourses around whether one can swim during menstruation reflect a kind of “folk” or “vernacular” knowledge: the fear of being exposed in a “pool of red,” accompanied by an implicit recognition of the gendered inequalities experienced by girls in such contexts.

In addition, one respondent, a 30-year-old Bengali Brahmin, Lecturer, recounts:

It took me some time and much knowledge to eventually arrive at an understanding of how menstruation is weaponised by both medicine and religious realms to structurally tame/domesticate women. Binding women to predetermined destinies of reproduction, motherhood, fertility, chastity, etc. Similarly, the way medical science defines women with PCOS/PCOD, fertility issues, as a severe physical lack in what makes a woman... ‘A WOMAN!’ immediately, it is no longer just another physical problem like any other (e.g., Diabetes, thyroid, etc) but necessarily, one that threatens her gender, sexual identity. Her entire being, her existence and purpose....

3. Desire, Agency, and Ritual Performance

Ritual performance eventually gets inseparably tied to gender performance through the proliferation of ideals of womanhood- chastity, fertility, motherhood, virginity- all tie a woman to her predestined religious purpose, which does not exist outside the labyrinth of gender roles. At the same time, ritual performance is not only a mechanism of control but also a field where women negotiate agency and desire, reworking these ideals through selective conformity, reinterpretation, or subtle resistance.

Feminist scholarship has cautioned against reading ritual observance only as subjugation; Mahmood (2005) argues that bodily discipline within religious contexts may itself be experienced as a form of piety and self-realization, complicating the binary of oppression and resistance. In this study, women often described moments where they selectively adhered to rituals, such as observing restrictions while living in their natal homes but relaxing them when living independently for work or education. Such selective conformity demonstrates how ritual discipline can be strategically navigated, allowing women to balance personal desire with communal expectations.

One of the Bengali Brahmin woman respondents confided how she grew up watching her mother be the primary provider when it came to domestic labour, including the ones during puja and other religious rituals. However, even during these days of her menstruation, the responsibility naturally shifted to her as a daughter rather than being undertaken by any other male members. She mentioned that on rare occasions when they, mother-daughter, were menstruating, the male members seemed utterly annoyed by the religious labour they had to provide for even everyday home pujas. This incident, in her own narrative and in a feminist translation, takes an interesting turn, where she said,

It is annoying and funny to see how my brother or father would struggle with this idea of arranging the flowers or even purifying the space for any kind of religious affair, even though we have lived together for so long. On those days, we (women)

become completely mysterious and unreachable to men. It gives me, and most importantly, my mother, some relief from work. That's funny and interesting! (In a personal Interview, Kolkata, 2025)

Earlier research on menstruation and identity formation (Ghosh, 2021) also highlights how women's choices around participation in rituals are shaped not only by fear of stigma but also by their aspiration to embody ideal femininity. Performing chastity, modesty, or ritual fasting can, at times, be embraced as expressions of devotion and moral belonging. Similarly, in the context of domestic religiosity, women reported deriving a sense of pride in upholding ritual responsibility, framing their participation as agency rather than imposition (Ghosh, 2025). These accounts illustrate how gender performance within ritual practice is not static but negotiated; women embody virtue through compliance, reinterpretation, or partial defiance, thereby inscribing their own meanings into the moral scripts of religion.

At the same time, the negotiation of agency is deeply entangled with desire- the desire for social acceptance, religious legitimacy, or familial belonging. In this way, the performance of gender through ritual becomes a relational act, simultaneously shaped by personal aspiration and communal surveillance. Ritual thus becomes a stage for the performance of idealized femininity, but also a space where women creatively rework the very codes that constrain them.

4. Knowledge Holders and Knowledge Performers

While women constitute the primary custodians and performers of domestic religiosity, the epistemic authority governing these practices remains overwhelmingly male. The contrast between the "knowledge holders" (priests, gurus, and male elders) and the "knowledge performers" (women who enact ritual instruction) reveals a deep asymmetry in religious power. Based on participant observation during household pujas and community rituals in South Kolkata, it became evident that the transmission of ritual knowledge followed a gendered division of epistemic labour.

During the recent Kali Puja observed in a friend's household in South Kolkata, an ethnographic contradiction became strikingly visible. The goddess herself, Kali, a figure who dismantles order, devours ego, and embodies uncontrolled feminine energy, stands as a radical symbol against the domestication of womanhood. Yet, the ritual practices surrounding her worship remained firmly embedded in patriarchal and Brahmanical structures. Despite the goddess's transgressive power, her veneration unfolded within an order of gendered hierarchy. The priest, a male purohit, led the chants, performed the Arati, and dictated the rhythm of devotion. Around him, women of the household prepared offerings, arranged flowers, and stood silently behind the ritual line- the boundary of authority and purity. While the goddess destroyed the cosmic illusion of control, her worship reinstated it. The paradox lay in the enactment: a feminine deity of chaos controlled through a masculine ritual script.

The women's role was performative and affective rather than interpretive: they embodied devotion, but they did not direct it. Here, they functioned as agents of belief but not authors of ritual knowledge. In this sense, Kali Puja becomes a site where the paradox of

feminine divinity and gendered subordination coexist. The epistemic divide between those who know (the male priests) and those who perform (the women) thus mirrors the broader structure of gendered religiosity. The goddess is the ultimate transgressor, but the ritual re-domesticates her. The contradiction itself, between who liberates and the ritual that binds, captures the gendered politics of knowledge in Bengali Hindu religiosity. The female devotee, standing before the goddess of power, becomes both the vessel and the boundary of that power.

5. Ritual, Violence, and the Politics of Exclusion

The regulation of the female body in both puberty rituals and domestic morality resonates with broader structures of patriarchal violence. Banerjee (2013) demonstrates that witch-hunts in India represent extreme manifestations of this logic, where accusations of impurity and deviance legitimize public punishment and exclusion. Ray (2018), drawing on Foucault, further highlights how confessional subjectivity and pastoral power regulate sexuality and morality, producing compliant subjects through the internalization of surveillance. Within Bengali Hindu contexts, even when violence is less spectacular, the constant surveillance of the female body constitutes a form of everyday violence, where stigma and exclusion act as tools of moral governance. Here, ritual purity is shown to operate not only at the symbolic level but also as a lived politics of exclusion that perpetuates both caste and gender hierarchies.

The social construction of knowledge surrounding women's bodies transforms biological phenomena such as menstruation into instruments of patriarchal control, aligning them with the demand for legitimate heirs within the family. With menarche marking a girl as a capable reproductive subject, she becomes quickly subsumed into expectations of motherhood and childbearing as the central duty of "being a woman." Within Bengali Brahmin middle-class households, this transition is reinforced through ritual practices and moral discourses that inscribe reproductive capacity with both symbolic honour and latent shame. As Douglas (1966) argues in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, such ambivalence is a common pattern across societies and religions, where pollution and renewal coexist within the same bodily processes. In her words, "that which is rejected is ploughed back for the renewal of life" (Douglas, 1966, p. 170). Menstrual blood thus becomes simultaneously stigmatized as a pollutant and celebrated as the foundation of lineage, situating women's bodies at the paradoxical intersection of purity, danger, and social reproduction.

Conclusion

When it comes to the body of knowledge and identity creation in menstruation, "all women menstruate" is used as a blanket statement that is supposed to club all women and their lived experiences together. However, these experiences are in fact subjective and culturally diverse. It invalidates the existence of trans-woman and trans-people who do not bleed for very different reasons. In addition, it questions the gender identity of women who start their menopause early or elderly women. Menstruation and the socio-cultural knowledge around it bestow and strip women of their sexuality as per the whims

of the religious power structure.

The discourse on purity and pollution can be traced since Durkheim's 'sacred' and 'profane', which found a more contemporary analysis with Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger* (1966), whereby she argued that concepts and ideas about pollution are culturally defined. There is no dirt or pollution per se; it is only when certain substances or practices transgress cultural boundaries that they become problematic. In fact, the 'menstrual blood', culturally referred to as 'bad blood', itself embodies a paradoxical nature if placed under a feminist analysis. The blood, defining 'woman-ness' of a female body, is ultimately 'free flowing', unlike the woman's body, which is under supervision and regulated via ritualistic performances. This places the question of knowledge, identity, and taboo on an interesting paradox of liberation and regulation.

If women are observed as propagators of this body of knowledge, they are more the bearers of generationally transmitted myths and regulations rather than the producers of knowledge. The traditional discourse on menstruation and social taboos is designed to conceal and dictate women's fate as 'mothers' or their primary role as reproduction, the idea that if you bleed, you bear children. This brings us to the wide world of 'Radical Menstruators' - a group of contemporary gender theorists and activists who have worked significantly on dissociating 'menstruation' from the body and sexual identities of women. Assumptions about who menstruates are challenged. Inspired by third-wave values of multiplicity, contradiction, inclusion, and everyday feminism, these menstrual activists engage in menstrual activism on public health, reproductive health issues on a small scale at the same time they queer or disturb the gender divide (Worcester, 2013).

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