

# The Power of Blood

written by Guest Contributor | September 3, 2019



That first menstruation was a shock. Bleary eyed, I woke up in the middle of the night and saw the blood, spotty and sticky and dark—yet undoubtedly from my own body. What was most surprising, perhaps, was that there was no pain. Until then, as a child, I'd associated blood with pain—with scrapes and scratches from falls on the concrete sidewalk or tar driveway, when playing tag and tripping while running a little too fast. To be able to touch and see my own blood without the accompanying fear and pain was itself, a revelation.

At first, as a twelve year old, I felt invincible. I wanted to grow up; I wanted to be a woman. I felt ugly, what with my mismatched clothes, big glasses, and unibrow. Maybe this period was the first step towards adulthood and a tentative promise of beauty.

When the blood came, I was in India, visiting my grandparents in Hyderabad over the summer. I watched beautiful young women don bright silk langa vonis (half-saris), later changing into full saris, marking a traditional South Indian ritual—a coming of age ceremony. Giggling girls, turned into elegant women. I admired their long braided hair, the heavy gold jhumkis hanging from their earlobes, the vaddanam accentuating their waist.

And yet, I felt a twinge of something, perhaps deep unease. Why was a young woman's period being celebrated so publicly? Was it really something the whole community needed to know? In a way, it felt like a violation of something so private. It was an advertisement: this girl is available for marriage. The irony didn't escape me: we weren't to talk of our period with men and boys, and yet, were put on garish display for all to see and inspect.

Soon after, menstruation began to feel more like a curse. Sometimes, it physically disabled me, with the cramps and bloating that came along with it. I hated having to carry pads around with me everywhere I went, to make sure I could slip one into my pocket or purse if I had to change them during the day. I had to think ahead, mapping out when and where I could stop by a bathroom every three to four hours. I hated the sticky feeling of blood. And most of all, I hated the nights, when the period blood would inevitably seep out of my pads and stain my pajamas, or sometimes even the bedsheets themselves. Every morning, I dreaded having to scour my sheets for a sign of

blood. In India, where I shared a bed with my grandmother, it was a constant worry.

You see, I had been told that tampons weren't for me. They weren't something that *good girls* used, at least, not in our South Indian family. There was, I came to understand, something taboo about them—something bad that encouraged sex and sexuality. These misconceptions made me so hesitant that until the end of college, I never tried using a tampon. And once I did, I was angry. Why was such a convenient invention that made this monthly experience so much better kept from me using these myths?

My body was changing, but I had no one to tell me what that meant for myself, or for the world I inhabited. There was a culture of secrecy around sex and all things related; all I knew was that I wasn't supposed to be having it until I was married. And if I was, it was something to hide.

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So many myths and superstitions still pervade our conception of menstruation. A period in my family means that women don't go to the mandir, or enter the puja room at home. Back home in New Jersey, we have a little altar in our kitchen corner, with pictures and figurines of Lakshmi, Saraswati, Ganesha, and Venkateshwara. Usually, when it's time for a puja, mom would ask me to gather some fresh flowers in the garden to place around the idols. I'd mix blood red kumkum with water and carefully, with my middle finger, fashion a perfectly circular bindi on the forehead of Vishnu and Laxmi.

But when it was that time of month, I wasn't supposed to touch or get too close to these idols. I couldn't enter the puja room or go to the temple. I certainly wouldn't light the incense myself. I wouldn't taste the sweet round laddoos, or rice vermicelli payasam, prasad that had been blessed by God.

God was off limits. I wasn't to receive blessings; I wasn't pure.

Looking back, it's surprising to me how little I questioned this practice. But when I was turning thirteen, this seemed like a blessing in disguise. The last thing I wanted to do with my precious weekend was to spend it at the temple chanting Sanskrit verses. A typical teenager more interested in Good Charlotte and dying her hair hot pink than her religion, I was thrilled that my time of month would get me out of spending a Saturday afternoon dressed in a shalwar kameez and making laps around the idols at Krishna mandir.

Only later did I begin to question why we were considered so dirty, so impure that even God wouldn't accept us. Didn't God create us women? Wasn't menstruating natural? Didn't it point to the beauty of our bodies, to our incredible capacity to give birth? Wasn't menstruating a type of magic—a regeneration?

If anything, menstruation needs to be celebrated. Women, by virtue of our wombs, should be revered around the world. We bring new life into the world; our bodies should be treated like precious temples. Yet, we have been deemed 'impure' for millennia.

The root of this menstrual taboo in Hindu mythology might be traced back to a story about Indra, the king of gods, who had to find a way to discard the accumulation of his sin. He distributed it among the earth, the seas, and the trees—and women took on a share of his sin. Since then, they were cursed with monthly bleeding.

But we need only to look around us to find examples of cultures that treat women differently, and that see menstruation as a source of power, not impurity. The Cherokee nation considered menstruating women sacred, strong, and infused with the ability to defeat enemies. Some cultures considered menstruating women as sorcerers imbued with magic, like in Ancient Egypt, where menstrual blood was incorporated into medical treatments and spells.

In Ancient Greece, menstrual blood was mixed with wine and spread in the fields when it was time for crop planting, to enhance the soil's "fertility." Among the Bauls of Bengal today, menstrual blood is mixed with milk, camphor, palm juice and sugar, and drunk by those present, viewed as a powerful substance that aids memory, concentration, love, and joy.

Among some tribes in India, too, menstruating women are viewed to have abilities: for instance, to make flowers bloom.

Clearly, there is nothing divinely ordained about patriarchy.

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In my late twenties, I found myself in rural Nepal, walking across the hot, dusty Terai plains. I was there working with an international NGO, and we'd traveled from Kathmandu to far-western Nepal, all the way to the India-Nepal border.

The sky was blue and bright, the air clear—a far cry from Kathmandu's skies, choked grey with smog, pollution, and dirt. Reveling in this newfound freedom, I took the deepest breaths to fill my lungs. I walked with several Nepali women who were human rights activists and non-profit leaders. We crossed a large rocky expanse, my feet now covered in dust. In the monsoon season, they told me, this stretch would fill with water and become impassable, cutting off the villages just past from the rest of the world as the rains fell.

We walked up a meandering path carved into the hillside, a steep drop to the Mahakali river on our left, which marked the border. If we crossed the river, we would be in Indian territory. The river's water was clear, reflecting the hills, rocks, and lush greenery surrounding us. The Nepali women began to

sing folk songs to pass the time, their melodic voices lifting me up above the valley. Soon enough, we encountered a clearing and broke for lunch. We stopped by a small shop, where the owner made us spicy Maggi noodles with eggs, chili, and tomatoes, serving up steaming hot milk chai on the side.

As we ate, one of my companions asked the shopkeeper about chhaupadi, the practice of isolating women and girls during menstruation and after childbirth. Although it was abolished by the Supreme Court in 2005, it remains prevalent in rural communities throughout Nepal.

Did she practice it?

Follow me, she said.

The shopkeeper took us to the dark shed next to her home. This, she announced, is where she stayed while menstruating. The shed normally served as storage space and a home for cattle. It had no heating, no insulation, and not even a proper door to protect from the weather outside. There were no blankets or bedding. She slept on the ground, or sometimes, on a mat. The ground was rough concrete, far from hospitable.

During her period, she told us, she slept in the shed. She didn't touch anything; someone brought her food and water, while she ate separately from her family. Her diet had to be simple: plain rice and salt. Milk, butter, yogurt, meat, and vegetables were forbidden. She washed her clothes far from the home.

She wouldn't touch plants, fruits, or flowers during that time—for they may die.

Why did she do this, we asked.

She was considered so impure that anything she touched or ate, including fruits or vegetables, was seen as contaminated. Food, considered sacred, would rot. Plants and flowers would die. Crops may fail. And fear overwhelmed her: the fear that if she stepped out of line, some harm would befall her family as repercussion. They might fall ill or get hurt. She couldn't take that risk.

But this misogyny has real impacts—and the worst consequence is death.

In one of many such cases, in 2017, an 18-year-old Nepali girl slept in a cowshed overnight. There, she was bitten by a snake and died. Simply because her most natural bleeding was deemed impure, she paid the price with her life.

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“When I was a girl, we stayed at home during our period time. We didn't cook

or go to school. We didn't go out to buy vegetables," my grandmother recounted to me one summer, while I visited her in Hyderabad. "But it was a good thing; it gave us a break from housework and allowed us some time to rest."

When it was that time of month, my grandmother mostly kept to herself in the bedroom. Girls then stayed home from school, like too many still do today, for the lack of sanitary pads, public restrooms, and girls bathrooms in schools. She got a break from spending most of her time in the kitchen, helping her mother, as was her normal responsibility.

But my grandmother had been privileged enough to think of this time not as a cage—but as a breath of fresh air. Her interpretation made me wonder: was there power in her reclaiming that space, a space for herself—for women alone?

Indeed, in some places, women form their own menstrual rituals, creating safe spaces to rest away from the male gaze. This gives women respite from household burdens and sexual pressures; it offers them a few days of liberation.

Sometimes, these spaces are created quite literally. As anthropologist Wynne Maggi documented in Pakistan's Kalasha Valley, women spend time in large communal menstrual houses (bashali) which serve as a holy space. Men are not permitted to enter, but women can choose to come and go. The space serves as a refuge, allowing women to escape the daily burden of work at home and in the fields. They are free from the scrutiny and social pressures of relatives. They live collectively, caring for one another and helping to deliver babies.

Similarly, Ulithi women from the South Pacific stay in huts together when breastfeeding and menstruating, bringing their children with them. Unlike chhaupadi in Nepal, this experience is not isolating; these women do it together, turning it into a joyous, communal experience.

In a sense, this space offers them autonomy—perhaps like that respite offered my grandmother.

In other cases, it offers space for regeneration and revival. Many native women see this time of month as a shared spiritual experience. For example, women from the Anishinaabe Oshkiniikwe tribe see menstruation—or the full moon—as a sacred time where women connect with their grandmothers. Ojibwe women view it as an opportunity for cleansing and rejuvenation, where they let go of the negative energies accumulated over time. It is a celebration of womanhood.

Menstruation does not have to be painful, or brutal, or isolating. Women-led traditions have given birth to communal ways of living, of carving out time for women's freedom, and space for meditation on our bodies, on our capacity for birthing new life.

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The Sabarimala temple in Kerala is hidden up in the hills, nestled within a deep forest reserve, home to tigers. It is a most holy of places, hoisted up towards the heavens at 4,000 feet above sea level.

This shrine is home to lord Ayyappa, an eternally celibate deity. The mandir, which attracts more than 50 million pilgrims every year, is only open to those who do not menstruate. Women between age 10 and 50 are banned, deemed unclean by virtue of their monthly bleeding. Women could not receive this lord's blessings; they were limited in how they could practice their own religion.

Last year, in a landmark judgment, India's Supreme Court struck down this ban, holding that it violated the right to equality in worship. The temple's doors were finally, and astonishingly, open to women.

Justice Dipak Misra wrote in his decision, "Religion cannot be the cover to deny women the right to worship. To treat women as children of a lesser God is to blink at constitutional morality."

These words feel like balm, like a sense of salvation, of something elusive: equality before the law, to eventually be translated into social equality that allows women into the most hallowed spaces, until now inaccessible to us.

For a moment, no longer are we women this: children of a lesser God. A legal recognition of what we have always known – that women are not impure, that we have power beyond knowledge, the ability to advance the human race, and that our monthly bleeding deserves nothing less than love from the very same God that birthed us.



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