

**MENSTRUAL PRACTICES IN WESTERN NEPAL-  
PERSISTENCE AND CHANGE**

**A Dissertation**

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**By**

**Rajya Laxmi Gurung**

**T.U. Regd. No.: 6-4-28-306-2017**

**Central Department of Sociology**

**Tribhuvan University**

**Kirtipur, Kathmandu**

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**TRIBHUVAN UNIVERSITY**  
**FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES**  
**CENTRAL DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY**  
**MPHIL PROGRAMME IN SOCIOLOGY**

**LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION**

I hereby certified that this dissertation entitled "**Menstrual Practices in Western Nepal- Persistence and Change**" was prepared by Ms. Rajya Laxmi Gurung under my supervision and guidance. I hereby recommend this dissertation for final examinations by the Research Committee of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Tribhuvan University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy in Sociology.

---

Prof. Madhusudan Subedi  
**Supervisor**

**TRIBHUVAN UNIVERSITY**  
**CENTRAL DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY**  
**FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES**  
**MPHIL PROGRAMME IN SOCIOLOGY**

**LETTER OF APPROVAL**

The dissertation entitled “**Menstrual Practices in Western Nepal- Persistence and Change**” was submitted by Ms. Rajya Laxmi Gurung for final examination by the Research Committee of the M.Phil. Programme in Sociology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Tribhuvan University, in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the **Degree of Master of Philosophy in Sociology**. The Research Committee hereby certifies that this dissertation has found satisfactory and accepted for the degree.

**Research Committee:**

Prof. Madhusudan Subedi .....  
 Dissertation Supervisor

Associate Prof. Pasang Sherpa, Ph.D .....  
 Head of Department

Associate Prof. Tika Ram Gautam Ph.D .....  
 Expert

Guman Singh Khatri Ph.D .....  
 Expert

**Date:** April 2025

## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis, entitled "Menstrual Practices in Western Nepal- Persistence and Change," is my own work and has not been submitted for candidature of any other degree.

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Rajya Laxmi Gurung

**Date:** April, 2025

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**Bhasepati, Lalitpur**

## ABSTRACT

Menstruation is the indication that women body is fertile and capable of carrying child which is one of the essential biological processes that assure the continuation of the human species. However, menstrual practices had been culturally framed, in global north it is associated with Shame and guilt (McHugh 2020), whereas in South Asia it is associated with ritual impurity (Höfer 1979, Khatiwoda et al 2021). Menstruation as ritual impurity in some communities of far-west region of Nepal take the extreme of menstrual restriction/ exclusion where menstruating women are banished to “*chaupadi*” menstrual hut (away from the main house) for certain number of days while menstruating. In 2018, government of Nepal declare practicing “*chaupadi*” illegal and punishable by law which include 3 months of jail time and 3 thousand rupees of fine. This effort from government is also complemented by Nongovernment organization work in far-west region which include creating awareness regarding menstruation in WASH initiative. Many view menstrual exclusion from feminist or from human rights perspective and associate it with the discourse of women liberation. To understand menstrual exclusion, there are number of studies done on menstrual exclusion specifically focusing on far-west region of Nepal. However, these studies either focuses on presenting negative impacts of menstrual exclusion on women or present the menstrual exclusion from health perspective only. Only handful of the studies tries to explore the practices from sociological perspective, however these studies examine the menstrual practices from the perspective of either oppression/ empowerment duality or present it as the religious dogma having rigid structure with no space for negotiation or where women or community has no agency to change. Only handful of the studies have attempted to study the change in the menstrual practices, however these studies have very narrow focus taking one or two factor as the cause of change – like education and that too over generation only. These studies do not take account of the different sociological changes and external intervention these communities have been experiencing over the three decades including changes in political regime. To address the above mention gaps, this study engages with three main research question current menstrual practices, underlying structures and value system that upheld the practices; Changes in menstrual practices and factors that led to those changes; menstrual practices under different socio-political regime. The study was carried out in four sites of four

districts of far-west region of Nepal- Kanchanpur, Dailekh, Jumala and Achham. The study uses qualitative research methodology and uses in-depth interviews, key informant interviews and focus group discussion in four study sites.

The findings indicate that, the underlying structure and knowledge upholding the exclusionary menstrual practices is the religious belief that present the origin of menstruation to a sin and menstruating bodies as a ritually impure body. This belief is upheld by the elaborate system of divine punishment and wrath, where Hindu priest and religious healers / leaders like *Dhami* act as an interpreter who interpret any misgivings to the individual, family, or the community to the lapses in the menstrual practices. The study also challenges the discourse where religious practices especially associated to global south is presented as rigid structure. The study shows that the socio-economic changes like migration, education and other external intervention from government and nongovernment actors does bring the changes in menstrual practices. The study also presents the menstrual practices adopted by communities and women under different socio-political regime, however the study concludes that, without demystifying and de-linking the interwind belief system of purity and cosmic balance, women agency cannot be expanded simply by force or by shame. The study also includes methodological reflection especially doing research on sensitive issues where researcher's gender is deeply interwind with the very essence of the research, the researcher's positionality; her ontological belief; her ethical and moral compass as well as her ability for critical reflection including reflexivity, plays a crucial role in the quality of qualitative data being collected and the way she analyzed the data. And many times, lead to ontological shift in the researcher as well.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the study

In early 2000s “*Chaupadi*” captured the imagination of global media as the extreme form of exclusionary menstrual practices that banishes menstruating women to “*Chuagoth*”. International media not only brought the death resulted from accidents in “*Chuagoth*” to public discourse but also captured the poor living conditions of menstruating women in those huts to global attention. This attention changed the discourse of menstruation in Nepal where in 1990s it was taken under health and hygiene theme, however with global attention on “*Chaupadi*” the discourse was reconfigured and linked to violence against women. With active engagement of NGOs and Global pressure, Government of Nepal declared practices of “*Chaupadi*” illegal in 2005. However, only in 2015 it was put under crime punishable by 3 months of imprisonment and five thousand rupees of fine. This change in narrative also shifted the interest of researchers in menstrual practices from health perspective to more into sociological perspective. However, early researchers were primarily descriptive in nature and presented “*Chaupadi*” as an isolated practice of certain communities or certain remote districts of Nepal, only handful of the studies attempted to dig deeper and shed lights on the structure and ideology that upheld these practices.

### 1.2 Statement of the Research Problem

There is no doubt that menstruation is a biological process that indicate that female body is producing egg and with no fertilization the body is shedding blood from lining of uterus. This bodily phenomenon is one of the most important biological processes that ensure the continuation of any living being. And it appears that among living being, it human that has interpreted this biological process socially. And constructed meaning around it which shaped not only the experience but also practices observed by women during menstruation. In global north the menstrual discourse is dominated by silence and taboo whereas in Nepal especially among Hindu communities it is viewed from the lens of purity and profane where the menstruating women are considering impure and sinful whereas the menstrual practices are observed among Hindu families in the varying degree of exclusion. However, many menstrual studies

have focussed primarily on “*Chaupadi*” or to places where extreme menstrual practices is being observed.

Most of the study presented these extreme menstrual practices as “evil practice” (Bam, 2020), as restriction for women’s development that restricts them to be free from “social servitude and superstition” (Amgain, 2011), and looked it from human rights perspective and concluding that its practices has denied or limited women’s capability to live a safe, healthy, and educated life (Khadka, 2014). Khadka (2014) presented the *Chaupadi* as superstitious practice causing women to suffer in the name of religion and tradition. Similarly, NHRC (2019) report identifies “*Chuapadi*” as inhuman and shameful practice and recommend effective implementation of legal provision by federal, provincial, and local government. These studies mostly focussed on highlighting the impact of menstrual exclusion on women health and well-being. Bam(2020) argued that the menstrual exclusion is responsible for producing overwhelming problems for civilized society example rape of women and girls in menstrual hut, physical violence, death due to snake bites or psychological problem faced by women during segregation period. NHRC (2019) report took the menstrual practices beyond the violence and linked it with women struggle to live dignified life with safety and protection.

These studies also focused on institutions that produce and sustain menstrual exclusion. Study by Amgain (2011) identifies local *devi-devta* system, Jaisi system, family elders, caste system, regional social system and local socio-political system as local agencies that transmit this practice from one generation to another. Findings from Bam (2020) shows that in his research site all the 150 participants has “*Chaugoth*” and were practicing untouchability during menstruation. Study aby Ghimire et al (2017) also find prevalence of exclusionary menstrual practices in all her study sites. His study shows the universality of the practice where the belief in menstrual exclusionary practices were high in case of older generation whereas only handful of young participants expressed the willingness to abolish the practice but afraid from social repercussion as well as fear of unknown that can cause harm to them and their society. Similar were the findings of Ghimire et al. (2017) shows that at least in adolescent girls there is desire to end the restriction both physical separation and in food. NHRC Report (2019) identify social belief of fear as one of the prime

factors that compel individual to continue the practice. According to the report any lapses in menstrual exclusion observation is linked to calamity in the community, drought in the village, and to sickness even to the pandemic as well. Its finding shows the strong role of *Jhakari*, priest, and religious leaders to continue the fear-based belief system. The fear is also linked with clan deity and if women do not follow the practice prescribed by the religious leaders, *Dhami* and *Jhakari* or do not stay in *Chaugoth* they fear that it will lead to their clan deity being angered causing sickness, bad luck/ event to the family and village as well as can lead to death to the family member.

Above studies paints the menstrual practices as primitive, superstitious, evil-practice, inhuman and expressed the need to abolish it as soon as possible but also present its deep-rooted nature in the community as well. However, with great attention to “*Chaupadi*” it might feel that this menstrual exclusion is only being practiced in few communities of Suduparschim province. However, Hindu religious text (Sridhar, 2019) indicate that these exclusionary menstrual practices are prescribed and hence can be taken as normative guidance for all Hindu communities. Few research paper on Hindu communities from South-Asian region has shown that the menstrual exclusion is practiced in the communities but in varying degree of severity (Das, 2008; Nagarjan, 2007; Sridhar, 2019). In case of Nepal NHRC Report (2019) acknowledges that the menstrual practices is being observed across Nepal and its extreme form is being observed in mid and far-western region of Nepal where menstruating women are banished to small hut known as “*Chaugoth*”. Another aspect of these studies is that they present the menstrual practices as rigid and with its severity appears that the practices have little space for change and with its strong relation with fear based religious belief system it might appear independent of any socio-economic and -political changes in the community. Only handful of studies in Nepal e.g. Ghimire (2017), Mishra (2014) and Rothchild & Piya (2014) looks at the changes in menstrual practices over generation or across various communities including communities of migrant families.

Study by Ghimire et al. (2017) looked at the practices in thirteen districts and concluded that communities with Hindu majority observed more rigid exclusionary practices. Her study shows that among adolescent girls there is desire to end the

practices which is in sharp contradiction to their parents or grand-parents' generations. Study by Meera Mishra focussed on subjective experience and interpretation of menarche by different generation. The study also concluded that with gradual weakening of theological belief on God, emergence of rationality, urbanization, rise of secularism and individualism has reduced the intensity of menstrual taboos across the generation (Mishra, 2014). In her PhD thesis, Nikita Sharma took the narrative of women of Nepalese descent settled in five different countries (Nepal, USA, UK, India, and Bhutan) and analyse the narrative changes in menstruation rituals, providing insights on how a ritual and a traditional practice is passes across generations, and how compliance with rituals is monitored, and how the domain is changed in the process. She concluded that the change in lifestyle, adaptation in religious identity in new social context, and changing social structure has resulted in the modification of menstrual practices observed by the women (Sharma, 2014).

Majority of these studies focused on practices and perception around menstruation and present the underlying socio-religious belief and structure that uphold the practices. Some of them do present changes as well as evolution in practices and perceptions only but offer limited linkages to wider socio-political context and its changes. These studies also show that "*Chaupadi*" might be just an extreme form of menstrual practices prevalent in Accham, however it has deeper meaning in Hinduism as well as its strong linkages not only to the positionality of women but also the existing socio-religious structure that uphold and ensure the continuation of the practice. Hence, opening the space where the practice instead of rigid can be taken as socially constructed and hence like any social construct must have undergone evolution reflecting changes in socio-political dynamics, must have space for negotiation and its corresponding meaning must have evolved with the changing positionality of women in the specified society.

Hence, this research aims to contribute on our understanding of menstrual practices as a sociological phenomenon. And like any sociological phenomena, I will explore the socio-economic and political context where this social phenomenon is constructed and the changes that results in its evolution. I will take the practice as a dynamic practice and explore the deeper socio-political context the menstrual practices have been

introduced, sustained and how the change in socio-political scenario impacted the practices, and how women and community negotiated the practices with the changing socio-political context. Another aim of the research is to expand our understanding of women agency under the religious structure where usually women are portrayed as oppressed with no sense of agency.

### **1.3 Motivation of the Research**

This thesis is the part of wider research project “Dignity without danger” funded by British Academy. The wider objective of the research project is to “Collaboratively analyse stigma and taboos to develop innovative strategies to address menstrual exclusion in Nepal”. Under this project I am leading the west research team focussing primarily five districts- Kanchanpur, Achham, Dailekh, Jumala, and Rolpa. I was drawn to this project as the project allowed flexible space for researcher to explore the menstrual practices in diverse districts, communities and view the practice as the manifestation of wider social structure and values of the practicing communities.

However, with professional opportunity to carry out the sociological research was also in tuned with my personal motivation which comes from the personal curiosity toward the obsession of Hindus especially Brahmin and Chettri families with menstrual status of women and their need to regulate menstruating woman’s activities. I was also surprise to observe similar menstrual practices in Assamese community (Assam, India) where I lived as a child. During my stay in Assam, I saw Assamese girls while menstruating was excluded from the communal functions or usual family space and maintain visible distance from other members of the family. And on the fifth day of menstruation, they were required to wash all their beddings and bath to gain purity. This experience was not only limited to simple observation but their practices extended to my menstruating experience in their community. As once our Assamese land lady was furious that I dried my menstrual cloths near her cow shed. At the time I did not understand her anger. Another such incident included my younger brother who was at that time twelve- or thirteen-year-old. One day came home excitingly telling us that Assamese girls hold special power as there are days in months where their brothers or any man cannot touch them as their bodies have power to make them sick. At that time, I was busy with my SLC exams and did not pay any special attention except annoyance that these embarrassing bodily events are being

discussed so openly. However, these experiences made me aware that the menstruation which is a biological process has deep social meaning.

In my personal level my menstrual experience and understanding was shaped by my Gurung identity living in the wider community which was dominated by Hindu values and individuals. Being family of Indian army, I have spent my earlier years in Army quarters with frequent posting as a result my family was the steady source of enforcing practices and providing its meaning. In case of my families' menstrual practices, I did not observe my mother practicing any menstrual exclusionary practices. The only time the menstruation subject was discussed was the time I got my first menstruation and my mother asked me privately that while drying my menstrual clothes I should cover it with thin clothes so that my brother won't see it. She told me that I will be sinned if I do so. I was irritated by that logic as it sounded wired and strange as I see no connection between the menstrual cloth, sin, and my brothers. And on the top the act of my brothers seeing the menstrual cloth is bringing me sin sounded absurd to me. However, this annoyance must come from my lack of exposure to menstrual exclusionary practices and absence of any narrative linking it with sin. Hence the instruction and linkages of menstruation with sin, sounded absurd to me. And even after returning to Nepal, menstrual practices never came across to my mind until when there was a "*rudri*" puja at my home. At that time, I was living in Kathmandu for my higher studies. And I got an invitation from my mother to attend it. When I came to attend the "puja", she asked me if I was menstruating which I was and asked me to sit in another room separate from the room where Brahmin priest was performing the "*yagna*". Then only I remember that in the telephone she did ask me if I was "ok" and I said "Yes" but later I found out that she was asking me about my menstrual status. This was very strange as she never inquired about my menstruation and the only time when we have big "*rudri*" by brahmin priest it became the subject of inquiry, leading it to my isolation at my own house. Another such incident happened to me when I visited one of my female friends who was also brahmin, for a dinner. We were sitting on the dinner table and suddenly she needed something from her kitchen. And she went to the kitchen to get it, I was bored and I followed her. Suddenly she asked me if I was menstruating and I said "yes". Hearing this she asked me not to enter the kitchen. I was deeply upset not because I was not able to enter the kitchen but I felt humiliated by the thought of someone controlling my mobility and

with the assertion that my body was polluted. And her denying me to enter her kitchen felt demeaning and disrespectful. After that incident I was curious and asked few of my Brahmin girl friends about their experience. Some of them shared their bitter experiences on how during Dashain they were denied any tika because they were menstruating and they indeed felt discriminated. Beside these random incidences exclusionary menstrual practices were never discussed openly among my girl-friends who came from diverse communities but were practicing exclusionary practices in various degrees. However, in past few years the increasing reporting of “*Chaupadi*” and “*Chaupadi*” related death as well as increasing conversation among celebrities in media regarding exclusionary menstrual practices has brought it into my personal attention and allowed me to reflect on my brief personal experience with exclusionary menstrual practices. My curiosity was further enhanced by the discourse used by numerous NGOs/ INGOs which coined the term “Dignified menstruation” and link it to feminist discourse. At the same time few newspapers article also highlighted that even though “*Chaupadi*” is the extreme form of menstrual exclusion but almost all the Hindu families in various district including capital do practice this exclusion in varying form. This also matched my personal experience with Hindu families. These discussions and debates were limited and many times triggered by development sector initiative or global media attention, however, within Nepalese society “menstrual exclusion” although observed by many, is still brushed aside as a subject with little value. And the same is reflected in Sociological studies where either the focus is only on extreme practice portraying it as “evil” practice followed by primitive and uneducated people of “Far-west” or practice that will die out with generation on its own. This disinterest toward this practice yet the strong hold of this practice in every Hindu household fascinated me and motivated me to look at this practice from sociological perspective, find out its linkages with the society where it practices, its contribution to the making of “women” and how it is evolving or persisting or changing with the changing social context.

#### **1.4 Research Objectives**

The broader aim of the research is to examine exclusionary menstrual practices as a social phenomenon especially focusing on how the socio-economic and political changes has influenced the practice. The study will present the narrative of women,

reflecting on their menstrual practices, changes in the practices as well as their reflection on the context in which these practices has been observed or changed. The study will distinctly explore the context where the agency of women expanded to negotiate the practices. By presenting their voices the research aims to break the binary categorization of women from global south by euro-centric feminist in victim-rebel(heroine) dichotomy which also present religion as a rigid belief system where its member has no agency or power to negotiate. It also aims to challenge the dominant narrative that present “*Chaupadi*” as an isolated practice separate from wider position of women in Hindu society. In brief the objective of my study is:

***“To explore the sociological aspects of menstrual practices in West Nepal”.***

The objective is supported by three main research questions:

1. How women are observing menstrual practices and what are the underlying structures and value system that upheld the practices?
2. Are there any changes in menstrual practices and what are the reasons of such changes?
3. How changes in political regime have influenced menstrual practices?

### **1.5 Limitation of the Study**

Even though the researcher intends to do extensive field work, time and resource constraint will limit the number of days spend in various sites. As a result the researcher will rely heavily on the data collected through interviews and observation will be limited to few days spend each sites. Hence, the researcher will not be able to have experience all the rituals that are associated with menstruation in that particular community. However, with reflection of multiple participants I hope to minimize this limitation. Another limitation is imposed be the nature of research question which seek to explore the influence of changing socio-political order in the menstrual practices. However, these changes happen over the long span of time and hence researcher will be relying on participants memory and his/ her recollection, which can be re-interpreted to fit the current narrative. For this I will take cautionary note during analysis and interpret those reflection by considering the current socio-political context and changed positionality of the participant. Another limitation is imposed by the nature of negotiation that happen around menstrual practices, many of negotiation

happens in private space, foreign location or at random times or in past. Hence, once again the research will be dependent on narrative provided by the participants only. However, researcher will try to gather rich descriptive narrative with multiple sources, linking it to the scenario with the description of logical argument participant has provided to interpret those negotiation and changes. This hopefully will remove the personal digression. However, in no incident the researcher will challenge the narrative on the ground of accuracy or rational framework but will ask for inner dialogue (or even imagine it from the available literature) of the participant to capture her/his narrative truth.

## **1.6 Organization of the Dissertation**

I have organized this dissertation in nine chapters. The first chapter includes the introduction, which include a brief introduction to the discourse around menstrual practices in global south and in Nepal, followed by statement of the research problem, motivation behind the research, research objective and limitation of the study.

Second chapter reviews the existing literature around the menstrual practices, women agency and other social concepts that can shape or change the socio-cultural practices like menstrual practices. This chapter also include the research gap in menstrual research along the line of three major research question of the study.

Third chapter present the methodological framework of the study and present the rationale for the choosing qualitative methodology particularly ethnographic study. This chapter provide details of the research process, outlining rationale for selecting multiple sites, sampling, description of data collection tools and steps for data analysis and detail ethical consideration that provided guideline for data collection, data analysis and publications of the result. Chapter also include the methodological reflection presenting various ethical, morale and practical challenges faces by the researcher while doing research on menstruation. It also argues that the experience of the field not only shape the analysis of the data but can also bring ontological shift in the researcher.

Fourth, Fifth and Sixth chapter provide detail analysis of the research findings along the line of three major research question of the study- Menstrual practices in Western

Nepal; Socio-cultural factors that led to changes in Menstrual practices and Menstrual practices under different political regime.

Chapter seven, present the summary of the research finding along three major theme- Menstrual practices in Western Nepal; Socio-cultural factors that led to changes in Menstrual practices and Menstrual practices under different political regime including methodological reflection. The last section includes the two major contribution of the research to the sociological debate – Structure-Agency debate via continuation and changes of menstrual practices and impact of positionality on the way researcher collect and analyzed data.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter I present the relevant literature that will inform my field visits and inquiry. This will be further updated after the field visit to further support the emerging theme or phenomenon that need further exploration. As the research objective and question suggests I have three major themes where I am exploring the menstrual practices – structure that upheld particular kind of menstrual practices, changes in menstrual practices due to socio-political changes and negotiation by women within the rigid menstrual practices. Hence, the literature search was done under the above mentioned three major theme- structure that upheld the menstrual practices, changes in menstrual practices due to socio-political change and negotiation by women under rigid menstrual practices.

#### **2.1 Menstrual practices in Hinduism**

Since I will be focussing on menstrual practices among Hindu communities, it is pertinent that before dwelling to the field I have the basic understanding of the menstruation in Hinduism.

In her book chapter Leslie (1989) specify that origins, explanation and strict observance of menstrual practices mentioned in Hindu text, is written by men for men in a Brahmanical society that aimed to preserve deeply held hierarchical and androcentric society. The origin of menstruation is linked to the account where King of God, Indra had to kill *Vishwasya*. However, *Vishwasya* was a Brahmin and according to Hindu scripture one of the biggest sin a Hindu can do is killing a Brahmin. Because of this sin, Indra was not able to perform any of his duties. And to get rid of the sin he seeks help from three sources- earth, tree, and a woman. Each one took one third of the sin and in return got the boon. According to the text, women in exchange of one third of sin got the boon to able to conceive, and can enjoy sex in all season unlike other animals. Lidia emphasises that even though taking sin gave the women power to procreate but in text it got less attention but ability to enjoy sex throughout the pregnancy or all period got more highlighted and presented as promiscuous nature of women. The text also presents that since the menstruation is linked to one of the biggest crimes in Hinduism, any women with soiled cloth must be

avoided. It says that menstruating women is impure hence men should not touch, accept food from them, have intercourse or not even look at the menstruating women.

Similarly, Shridhar in his book (Sridhar, 2019) cites the various text from Hindu scriptures which establishes the link of menstruation and *Brahamahatya*. According to the text very menstruation indicate the failure of women to conceive a child, and by preventing that she is denying a “Brahmin” soul to come to earth. Hence, the failure of conceive ends with the bleeding which reflect the death of possible “Brahmin”. The text also provides the guidance on how menstruating women should be treated, It instruct fathers to give their daughters to marriage before menstruation and by doing so he will earn fruits of “*kanyadan*”. And every month a menstruating daughter stays unmarried it deplete the honour of father. These texts clearly reflect that menstruation was linked with procreation and any failure to do so was consider sinful. In the text however, the biological cycle was not accurate as it instructed husband to *give “ritudan”* (have intercourse) on fourth day of menstruation believing that it will result in conception. However, in first three days of menstruation women were considered impure – *Bhramahatyani*, *Chandal* (belonging to untouchable), and *dhobini* (washerwomen) and only on fourth day after ritualistic bath she becomes pure and ready of “*ritudan*”. The text also specifically describes all the exclusionary practices the menstruating women must observes and prohibit men from any contacts including sex in first three days of menstruation. Similarly, it links any sex, touch, gaze, or food offered by menstruating women to punishment where the men performing or accepting prohibited act will make them impure, sick and reduce his age. In one of the texts, it is mentioned that men living in the same house as menstruating women loses his status and becomes equivalent to “lower caste”. The scripture also has list of instruction for menstruating women which include avoiding certain foods, not to sleep in same bed as her husband, avoid wearing any Kohl to her eyes or ornaments, not to touch utensils or purify the utensils after touch, use hand to drink water, not to sleep, not to laugh, not to cut nails and not to participate or perform in any religious functions. And if she defies any of the rules or have lapses in her observance, will result in sickness to her husband or to her unborn child. Text in *Swasthani katha* present a story of brahmin wife who due to heavy workload perform certain household chores during menstruating, as a result even though her husband was a religious and pious Brahmin he was born as ox and the wife get born as bitch in next

life. And only after performing rituals by their son they finally get liberated (Bennett, 1983). All these text presents a scenario to women where any lapses in her menstrual practices have strong negative consequences to the well-being of man in her life, her children's and the consequences also move to the next life as well.

These texts are strongly related to "*Stridharma*" define in Sanskrit where her prime duty is to ensure the well-being of her family especially husband. And she ensures this through strict endurance of maintaining religious duties and chastity including observation strict religious rites, fast and purity. Not only human, in Hindu religion even goddesses must abide by the menstrual exclusion. In her study Das (2008) presents the ritual followed in *Khamkhya* temple in temple in Assam where according to *Swasthani varta* katha vagina of goddess Sati devi (wife of Shiv, who is one of the three major God in Hinduism) fell when her dead body started to decay. She shares about an annual festival observed in temple where for three days the temple is closed, and statue of goddess is considered to be resting and on fourth day they perform ritualistic bath and give pieces of clothes soaked in red colour to her follower. During that period the surrounding village observe fasting and restriction are imposed on food, celebration, or performance of other religious events.

### **2.1.1 Origins of Menstruation in Hinduism**

In Hindu religious text, origins of menstruation can be found in Rig Veda where the menstrual blood is linked with sin (Chawla, 1994). In the myth, king of heaven, Indra saves the universe by killing *Vishvarupa*, a Brahman which is an unforgivable crime of "*Brahamahatya*". To offload his sin, God Indra bargain with women, earth and a tree, each to take one third of the sin in exchange with the boon. Since women takes one third of God Indra's guilt, the guilt of "*barhamhatya*" appears every month in the form of menstruation in women.

In another Hindu text *Stridharmapaddhati* women are described as inherently promiscuous, dangerous, sinful, and impure in nature (Leslie, 1989). And to counterbalance the inherited guilt women are instructed to behave according to the codes of conduct (*Stridharma*). In this text menstruating women are considered impure for first three days (and nights) where on first day she is declared *Chandalini* (damned women), on second day *Brahmaghatini* (brahmin -killer) and on third day

*Dhobini* (untouchable, washer woman). And only fourth day she is considered to be pure. One interesting twist in this is that on fourth day the text recommends women to seek “*ritudan*” (intercourse) with her husband. The fourth day ritual of compulsory “*ritudan*”, has been explained by Nitin Sridhar in his book “Menstruation across cultures – A historical perspective” (Sridhar, 2019). He explains that in Hindu tradition, giving birth is not only considered a duty of the householder but also a dharmic action of helping an individual *Brahman* soul to enter physical universe and continue its karmic journey. Failing to conceive a child is equated with denying a “*brahman*” soul to enter the physical universe and hence every menstruation is made equivalent to “*brahamahatya*”.

### 2.1.2 “*Stridharma*”- Religious duties of women in Hinduism

Hindu religious text not only explains the origins of menstruation but also provides strict menstrual restriction women should observe with possible repercussion if the practice is not observed (Bennett, 1983; Sridhar, 2019; Leslie, 1989; Chawla 1994). These guiding practices are closely linked with “*Stridharma*”- duties of a woman. Under this code of conduct a woman should be a perfect “*dharmapatani*” or righteous wife, *pativrata* devoted to her husband. Contradictory to man, “*Stridharma*” does not envision “*moksha*” as the highest goal for a woman. Instead, the highest goal for Hindu women is “*saubhagya*” which means health and long life of husbands. For a woman there is no distinction between religious duties and daily chores as her services to her husband in the home is her worship of her god. The *Stridharmapaddhati* insists that a good wife worship no god other than her husband (Leslie 1989). There are numerous stories that link “*stridharma*” to the good or bad fortune of a husband or a son. One story, from much read “*Swasthani Varta katha*” in Nepal where sin due to lapses in menstrual practices by a brahmin wife not only followed her in next life but also after life of her “pious” husband. And both were born as bitch and a bull. This story is also linked with one of the major festivals of Nepalese Hindu women – *Rishipanchami* which is associated with taking ritualistic bath to atone any sins incurred due to the lapses in observing menstrual restriction by women during the previous year (Bennett, 1983).

These texts also provide elaborate guidelines on restrictions imposed on menstruating women and corresponding consequences of disobeying the restrictions. Some of these restrictions are:

<b>Restriction</b>	<b>Consequences of disobeying the restriction</b>
She should not use collyrium for her eyes	Her child will be blind in one or both eyes.
She should not comb her hair	Her child will be bald.
She should not massage her body with oil or ointments	Her child will have a skin disease.
She should not clean her teeth	Her child teeth will be discoloured.
She should not cut her nails.	Her child nails will be diseased.
She should not 'touch fire'	
She should eat only those foods which are fit for sacrifice	
She should use either her own cupped hands or a copper or iron vessel	If she drinks out of an earthenware vessel, her child will be a dwarf.
She should not eat food from her husband's plate	If she eats food from her husband's plate, her child will be insane.
She should not look at her husband	
She should not sleep on a high bed	
She should not spin thread, plait or cut rope or dig in the earth.	If she spins, or cuts rope, he will be impotent. If she plaits rope, her child will hang himself. If she digs in the earth, he will be bald or his life will be short.
She should not cry, laugh, talk a great deal, hear loud noises, run, roam about, exert herself, sleep in the daytime, sit in a draught; and so on and so forth.	If she laughs, her child palate, teeth, lips and tongue will be discoloured. If she talks a great deal, her child will be a chatterbox. If she hears a loud noise, her child will be deaf. If she runs, her child will be unstable.

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	<p>If she roams around, her child will be insane.</p> <p>If she sleeps in the day time, her child will be sleepy by nature.</p> <p>If she sits in draught, her child will be insane.</p> <p>If a menstruating woman have sex in first three days of menstruation, her child will be an untouchable or cursed.</p> <p>Man engaged in intercourse with menstruating women will lose wisdom, energy, strength, sight, and vitality.</p> <p>In contrast, if man is able to avoid menstruating women, then his vitality and strength will be enhanced.</p>
<p>No sex</p> <p>The husband must not sleep in the same bed with his menstruating wife</p> <p>Husband should not touch menstruating wife.</p> <p>If man happens to touch her, he must take a bath to purify himself</p> <p>Husband is expected to avoid his menstruating wife when he is eating, and refrain from looking at her when she eats, sneezes, yawns, or sits at her ease.</p> <p>Menstruating women should not cook food for her husband.</p> <p>Menstruating women should only put Kumkum (which is also offered to deities) only after taking ritualistic bath on fourth day.</p>	

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**Table 2.1** Prescribed menstrual practices in *Hindu Text* and corresponding punishment if the observer failed to adhere with prescribed practices.

The three days of restriction ends with ritualistic bath of purification. After purification bath she is instructed to gaze at sun, pray for a son and then attend her womanly duties. In the evening she is instructed to make sexual advances to her husband. Fourth day is considered as an opportunity to conceive. The text also instruct husband for his duty to provide sexual intercourse to his wife. Husband and wife failing to do so are instructed to be punished, husband to be put in the skin of donkey with hair turned outwards and send for begging. And this to be his livelihood for six months. According to the text Wife who refuses to have intercourse should be abandoned, devoured by the dogs and in next life will be reborn as a bitch, or a she-wolf. Husbands are instructed to proclaim wife publicly to be fetus-killer (Sridhar, 2019; Leslie, 1989).

From above discussion it is clear that even though within Hinduism biological significance of menstruation is recognized but all the narrative regarding its origins and associated practices has been presented through the lens of ritualistic impurity and linked with the most unforgivable crime in Hinduism -“*Brahamahatya*”. The above discussion also makes clear that “*Stridharma*” or duty of a wife has a soul purpose to serve her husband and produce offspring. And the practices / restriction around menstruation and repercussion of any lapses in the restriction is linked with misfortune and ill health of her husband and her children which is the core of the “*Stridharma*”(Leslie, 1989). Hence, by abiding strictly to the menstrual restriction a Hindu women is fulfilling her “*stridharma*” as outside the “dharma” she has no existence.

## **2.2 Social Structure that upheld menstrual practices**

Another aspect that we need to analyse is the socio-political structure that upheld the practices as well as allow it to continue. This section reviews the previous research on menstrual practices that reflect on the social structures that upholding or ensuring the continuation or resulted in changes of the exclusionary menstrual practices.

One of the most obvious and identified by number of researchers (Van Doon, 2019; Bam, 2020, Amgain, 2011; Khadka, 2014) as prime actors in village who not only promote menstrual exclusionary practices but also establish the link between any mishap in the village to the loose practice of menstrual exclusion by women are

religious leaders that includes priest, *dhami* and *Jahkari*. Similarly, social institutions like family, community and its members as reinforcing actors and institution who uphold the fear-based belief system where lapses in the menstrual exclusion will result in negative consequences to individual member, family, community and even cosmos including afterlife of the individual who loosely practiced it and specific members who are associated with them. These institutions and actors act as surveillance and make sure that the young women observe the restrictions to the fullest (Mishra, 2018; Sharma, 2014; Riessa Van Doon, 2019). Another set of actors that reinforce the practices, are the people who claim to be possessed by the god and hence need purity and will link their sickness to poor observation of menstrual exclusion by the women in the periphery (Bam, 2020; Amgain, 2011; Khadka, 2014; NHRC, 2019). Another reinforcing force are the religious events and rituals which reinstate the stories that links the menstruation to sin and promote the concept of menstrual exclusionary practices and share the consequences of not abiding the practices (NHRC, 2019; Bennett, 1983). Finally individual are also another source who carry this ideologue that menstruating women are sinful and carry the fear of negative consequences for not following the exclusionary menstrual practices (Rothchild & Piya, 2020). This gets reinforced with religious symbols, spaces and text that reinforce the idea or practice of menstrual exclusion.

### **2.3 Understanding Women Agency within Gender-traditional Religion**

Feminist scholars especially from global north, who are looking at women of global south in context of religion has portrayed then in binary perspective of victim-rebel dichotomy and instead of viewing religion as a living and adaptive system of belief and practices, they portray the religion as rigid belief system where its member has no agency or power to negotiate. This dichotomous portrayal of women ignores the lived experience of many women who continue to negotiate, adapt, and continue to live within the religious domain. And ignore the dynamic nature of Hinduism which not only has many sects but different periods when various ideological strand got dominant period. Study by Jessica Birkenholtz (2010) on *Swasthani varta katha* also shows similar changes where the new stories were added, different character came to prominent and different logical explanations were added in different period reflecting socio-political context of the time. Also, the dichotomous portrayal of women as

victim-rebel is problematic because it only identified agency from the perspective of liberal world view where revolt from the existing structure is only taken as the indication of agency for women. This narrow definition of agency will deny the woman's lived experience and portray their entire experience as a single non-agency term of victim.

Kelsy Burke (2012) present four approaches used by feminist scholars to review the agency of women who participate in gender-traditional- - resistance , empowerment, instrumental, and compliant approach. In Resistance approach women challenge or change some aspects of their religion, in empowerment approach women reinterpret religious doctrine or practices to feel empowered in their daily life, in instrumental approach scholar focus on non-religious positive outcomes of religious practices, whereas compliant approach focuses on different ways women conform to gender-traditional religious teaching. These four approaches is important to analysed the lived experience of women within the gender-traditional religious practices. Addition to above four approached there are number of studies that shows that women are not passive recipient within the rigid structure. For examples in her study "Dangerous wife sacred sisters" Bennett (1983) presents the various strategies adopted by women to push their agenda or to make their life more comfortable. Women told her that sex is one of the ways to influence their husbands favour and gain influence and security in their husband house. Another interesting argument presented by Jadwin (1992) where is argue that since being assertive or resisting patriarchal authority is defeated women instead choose to mimic the standards of virtuous women. Similarly study by Sharma (2018) who particularly look at the menstrual practices within the Nepalese diaspora present the various strategies, reflection and meaning making women does in a changing context to find what menstrual practices are meaningful and to abide by. These studies shows that even within the rigid religious patriarchal structure women are not just a reflection of the structure but have the agency to reflect, adapt, negotiate, or show compliance that are meaningful for them.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

From the above literature review it is clear, that the Hindu religious text associate menstruating bodies as a ritually impure status and require to observe restrictions. The text also elaborate repercussion on women, men, families, and communities, if they

fail to observe the prescribed menstrual practices. This understanding of the text is important to understand the origin of menstrual exclusion in the Hindu communities, and how these texts are interpreted in current context as well as allow us to find the authorities and social structure that upheld the belief system.

The above section also makes it clear that we need social structure to uphold any belief as well as the practices, however changes like migration, education, and intervention does have impact in any practices observed by the community. However, the current literature and studies present the menstrual practices especially in far-west region of Nepal as rigid. This study through its ethnographic methodology attempts to understand the complex practices of menstrual exclusion in context where the community is experiencing migration, intervention of state and NGOs inform of education, laws, or any other WASH related activities. While studying menstrual practices in communities where it is viewed as ritually impure and associated with rigid menstrual restriction, it is important to understand women agency within these community. Above literature review present the rich review on literature related to women agencies- resistance, empowerment, instrumental, and compliant approach. However, these approaches provide very black and white approach to understand the women agency in gender-traditional religious practices as well as how women understand the practices and use their agency is not independent of the context as well as their own belief system. For this the selected sites provide unique site where we can see three political context which views the women and menstruation in different light- Hindu State, Maoist conflict period and secular republic state.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This chapter provide an overview of the methodological framework that with guide the study. This includes rationale of choosing qualitative methodology in particular ethnographic study. This is followed by detail research process, outlining rationale for selecting multiple sites, sampling, description of data collection tools and steps for data analysis. At the end the chapter provides the detail ethical consideration that will guide not only the data collection process but also include the data analysis and publications of the result.

#### **3.1 Qualitative Research Methodology**

Selection of research methodology is one of the crucial steps of the research. This selection is dependent mainly on two assumptions- Ontology and epistemology of the study. Ontology represents the nature of reality and its characteristics (Creswell, 2007) whereas epistemology is a theory of knowing or in general the relationship between researcher and the subject being researched (Creswell, 2007). And during the research process, the researcher by employing various strategies will try to reduce the distance between herself and the subject being researched (Creswell, 2007). Before making the final assumption on the ontology and epistemology of the study, it is important to clearly link these assumptions with the research objective. As stated in in Chapter 1, the prime objective is to explore the sociological aspects of menstrual practices in west Nepal. This including finding the practices, social structure that is upholding the practices, influence of socio-political changes in the menstrual practices, and exploring negotiation of menstrual practices by women. If we study only the menstrual practices, then the nature of the study can be objective. However, the study is exploratory in nature seeking broader understanding of the practices, its linkages to socio-political and religious structure of the community and to explore possible changes in the practices and its underlying context as well as the negotiation carried out by the women within these practices. which has its roots on religion, socio-political context and the complex network of community and individuals that enforces and upholds the practices together. These requires researcher to capture rich individual narrative with complex and dynamic nature of community where these

practices are observed. From Chapter 2, Literature review even though the menstruation is a biological process, its meaning and the practices has been socially interpreted. And the subjective understanding of the individual and its social interpretation has resulted in diverse practices not only within the society but also resulted in the variation from one society to another and from one period to another. These subjective understanding and social interpretation are very much linked with patriarchal nature of our society, women position in society, the way society looks at women bodies and her sexuality (Janet and Sasser-Coen 1996). Hence, the is purely exploring the subjective experience of menstrual practices and its interpretation in communities in western Nepal. Hence, the ontology of my study is constructivist (Creswell, 2009). As this position assumes that social phenomena and its meaning are continually created by social actors where “social and categories are not only produced through social interaction but that they are in a constant state of revision” (Bryman, 2016, p.33). Another understanding of constructivist position is given by Creswell (2007), according to which in constructivist worldview the individual seeks understanding of world they live in, develop subjective meaning of their experience which can be varied and multiple. These subjective meaning guides the social practices (). Since these meanings are negotiated socially and historically and are formed through interaction with others and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individual lives (Creswell, 2007), hence the “Constructivist” worldview perfectly captures the assumptions that is guiding the research objective as well. Based on this the epistemology of the study is Interpretivist, as it recognizes the difference between people and require researchers to grasp the subjective meaning of social action (Bryman, 2016, p.30).

Based on ontology and epistemology of the study, I have chosen qualitative research methodology. This methodology allows the researcher to understand the context in which participants of a study experience the issue (Creswell, 2007) and instead of separating one from the other take both as complex interaction where meaning is formed and transformed (Denzin & Liocol, 2005). It allows the researcher to study subjects in their natural settings and provide tools that allows the researcher to “interpret the phenomena in terms of meaning people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.3). And its emphasis that the nature of reality is socially constructed and allows researcher to seek answers to the question that focuses on how the social

experience create and give meaning to social phenomena (Denzin & Liocol, 2005) and hence will shape the practice around it. Within qualitative research methodology there are several options and selection among these options is determined by research focus, nature of the problem and unit of analysis etc (Creswell, 2007). As menstrual practices have its deep roots in cultural belief and practices, it essential that we select ethnography as it allows the researcher to focus on entire cultural group (Creswell, 2007). It allows the researchers to describes and interprets the shared and learned patterns of behaviors and beliefs of a culture-sharing group (Harris, 1968). It also allows the researcher to understand the variations in menstrual practices among various communities as it takes the position that “human behavior and the ways in which people construct and make meaning of their worlds and their lives are highly variable and locally specific” (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010, p.1)

### **3.2 Research Design**

Research design provides an overall plan for conducting research. It provides a framework for data collection and data analysis, including instrument that will be used to collect the data (Bryman, 2016). This section provides details of the research design that will guide my research, this includes – rationale of site selection, sample size, detail of data collection tools, and data analysis with detail process and initial guiding theme.

#### **3.2.1 Site Selection**

Ethnography is a systematic approach to learning about the social and cultural life of communities, institutions, and other settings” (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). Hence, after the clarification of research objective and question I focus on culture and communities I was interested in. As stated in Chapter 1 and 2, I was interested in cultural practices of menstruation in Hindu communities. However, Menstrual exclusion is practices is observed across Hindu families in Nepal in varying degrees. So, selecting site was a challenging task. However, the extreme exclusionary practices in far-west makes an interesting site for the study. At the same note my research question also aims to explore the influence of changing socio-political context in menstrual practices also compel me to select those sites which are the primary sites of recent socio-political changes in Nepal including decade long Maoist conflict and

NGO initiative in many regions. Since I was looking at changes and how Hindu communities residing in different sites have adopted or altered the practices to reflect the context. Hence, the research was designed to be multi-sited focusing on Hindu communities. However, like many communities in Nepal these sites will have other ethnic communities and religious groups. And instead ignoring these communities I include them in the study to shed more light on research question that focuses on the change and adaptation of menstrual practices within the communities. In total I have selected four districts, the table outline the detail of each district. Among all the communities the prime focus of the study is the Hindu community as the literature and interest in Nepal particularly around menstrual practices is due to exclusionary menstrual practices that stems from Hindu belief system.

S.No	Districts	Rationale	Province	Detail of the community
1	Kanchanpur	One of the developed cities where you can find people migrated from other five districts of Sudurpashchim. Hence, provide interesting site to analyze the difference if any in menstrual practices from origion district to current.	Sudurpashchim Province (Province 7)	Hindu(Brhamin, Chetri, Dalit), Bonded free labour (Tharu and Rana Tharu), Christian, former leprosy survivor , Janjati (Magar)
2	Achham	Extreme menstrual practices being observed - “ <i>Chaupadi</i> ”. Strong Maoist presence during conflict period.		Hindu (Chetri and Dalit)
3	Dailekh	From religious point of view considered to be important district (One story says that it was the place of Devatas and initially called “Daibalok” which later become Dailekh.	Karnali Province (Province 6)	Hindu (Thakuri, Chetri and Dalit), Muslim
4	Jumala	Strong Maoist presence during conflict period.		Hindu(Thakuri, Dalit, Brahamin)

**Table 3.1** Selected site for Study

Specific location within each district will be selected with close consultation with NGOs working in menstrual health in these district where the primary criteria will be the place that reflect the menstrual practices in the district or provide the unique mix of contrast within the community.

### **3.2.2 Data Collection**

In ethnographic study the researcher's ears and eyes become the primary tools for data collection. This requires careful observation of "field" and collecting information by interviewing and recording what researcher see, hear and observing the action of people (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). For this purpose, I spend 10-12 days in each site and to immerse in the field I actively participate in the cultural events as well as through formal and informal communication with individuals observed and gather relevant information. To collect data I used in-depth interviews, focus group discussion as well as observation which was recorded using field diary.

#### **In-depth interviews**

In qualitative study particularly ethnographic study requires researcher to examine and learn the meaning people give to what they do (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010) and examine the way people make sense out of their own experiences in their own words (Cropley 2019). For this I used in-depth interviews which is used to explore the practices, changes and interpretation of women on the menstrual practices they observed. With this tool I allowed the women to explore, recall and request them to interpret those practices and changes so that they themselves support the analysis part as well. In-depth interviews, questions were broad and general allowing participants to offer in-depth responses about how they constructed or understood their experience (Jackson, Drummond and Camara, 2007). It also seeks views of participants (Bryman, 2008) on menstrual practices. These broad and general; question allowed researcher to understand how participant construct meaning of a situation (Creswell, 2007). The question also allowed the participant to share the specific contexts in which people have lived and worked or experience the situation or observed the specific practice in order to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants (Creswell, 2007). In-depth interviews were carried out with the women of the village between the age of 18 to above. The reason behind the age limit is for individual below 18

requires parental approval and since I was looking at menstrual practices as a whole not practices of adolescent girls, I can rely on the recall of women on their first period to find any relevant information between their menarche and 18 years old. Guiding question is attached in Annex I. However, these guiding question did not restrict the researcher as well as participants and further questions was added for each interviews that allowed the researcher and the participant to further explore the emerging data that provided unique insight not only on the complexities of individual participant but also the complexities of community the individual is residing.

### **Key Informant interviews**

Key informant interviews are taken with the individuals who are considered gate keepers of the community, for this research they are- Women Health volunteers, health teachers, elected representative, priest, community leaders, traditional healers etc. KII was used to understand the perspective of the influential individual as well as to find various interventions and its repercussion in the community. KII was used to build social trust as well as get social approval from gatekeepers of the community which I feel eased my entry to the community as well as earn trust from the community member to share information which they might feel taboo to share with outsiders (due to current narrative of menstrual exclusion in mainstream media and in NGO sector). KII included individual from both genders, however, I ensured that at-least few KII are female. Guiding question for KII is attached in Annex II.

### **Focus Group discussion:**

Focus group discussion is normally taken to understand the community collective understanding or practices or any contentions within the practices. Here also, FGD was used to understand common practices, tensions and dynamics within the community in context to menstrual practices. Since, its women who observes the practice and within a family are the key individual that enforce the menstrual rules, the FGD was carried out with either women groups or mother groups of the community. However, in line with the sensitive nature of the research, I made sure that the group remain homogenous in terms of caste or ethnicity as the confrontation or argument can create tension within the community. FGD was done through either the support of Key informant or women health volunteer or mother groups head as

they have access to community and has supported to create the rapport between researcher and participant to attend these FGDs. Guiding question for FGD is attached in Annex III.

### **Observation – Field note**

As stated above, ethnographic study uses the researcher as a means of tools to collect data. And this data collection not always relies on only formal conversation but it can be informal conversation within the community members, or any event the researchers has participated or incident she/ he had observed This provided in-depth understanding of cultural and social settings in which participants are experiencing or interpreting particular cultural and social phenomena. It also provided additional information on how the participants are observing those practices. To record those observation, I used daily diaries for reflection and recollection (Punch, 2012).

### **Sampling**

In qualitative research exact sample size is not fixed or predetermined because the purpose is not generalization but finding deeper understanding of the context and complexity of the process However, even in qualitative research we need to select participants in reference to research question (Bryamna, 2016). For this participant selection was loosely based on the demography of the site, so that i capture different geographic settlement, caste, ethnicity, and religion of that site. This sampling is identified as Stratified purposive sampling in which cases or individuals are selected within the subgroups of interest (Patton 1990; Palys, 2008). Within the subgroup I have selected the individuals based on access and availability. Instead of seeking pre-approval or pre-selection, I first developed a map of settlement of the village and walk around in each settlement and find willing participant in their own place, this was their home, work place, farm, or any place they find it comfortable.

As stated earlier in qualitative research the sample size is not predetermined instead it rely on data saturation. – which means that number of interviews ‘needed to get a reliable sense of thematic exhaustion and variability within their data set (Guest et al, 2006). In total I conducted 32 KII, 48 IDI and 8 FGD.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

In case of ethnographic data analysis, the process is recursive and iterative process. And this process starts in the field itself, where the researcher continuously raises questions that further clarify the ideas that are emerging in the field itself (Murphy, & Dingwall, 2001). During the entire process of data collection and in data analysis I looked for emerging patterns and results which Murphy, & Dingwall (2001) as a “mystical process” (p. 198) where instead of leading the data analysis I followed the data. However, to give some structure I followed three broad steps recommended by Wolcott (1994)- description, analysis, and interpretation of the culture-sharing group. Wolcott (1994) suggest that data analysis should start from description of culture-sharing group and setting. In this Wolcott(1994) suggest the ethnographic researcher to become storyteller, where reader can see what you have seen in the field with no intrusive analysis but at an appropriate level of details.

As stated above, in ethnographic study the data analysis is done simultaneously. Hence, during data collection I performed initial data analysis in the field itself which shaped my further data collection. This was done through daily diary reflection on data on that day and developed strategy for next day data collection. At the end of data collection more systematic data analysis was carried out. For this, as suggested by Creswell (2007) I begin with initial conceptual categories derived from prior research. And further theme was added to reflect the emerging data from the field.

<u>Exclusion</u>	<u>Punishment</u>	<u>Authorities</u>	<u>Change</u>
Food,	Nature of punishment	Individuals,	Negotiation
Water,	Who get punished	Text,	Migration
Activities,	How it can be corrected	Deity	Intervention from NGO,
Space,			government, education
Rituals			Maoist conflict
			Inter-generation

**Table 3.2** Emerging theme from the Field

All the data was be transcribed using software Express Scribe and coded using dedoose software. All the interviews were be coded using four broad theme- exclusion, punishment, authorities, and change.

### 3.4 Ethical Consideration

Any study that involves human participants bring significant ethical concerns and it is the responsibility of the researcher to take necessary steps to protect the participants from possible harm even when some of the participants might be ignorant or cavalier about the risk (Murphy & Dingwall, 2001). And when the research is on exclusionary menstrual practices which one of the most contested issues in Nepal and in wider South Asian Hindu community, the researcher has to take extra caution to reduce the risk as well as to protect its participant and their settings from possible harm that can result not only during research but also during publication.

Under this moral complexities and legal challenges, ethical consideration can be very important for the research. Since only “*Chaupadi*” is illegal, questioning about menstrual practices will not have any legal repercussion however to break the silence and protect participant from moral judgment or fear of judgement the research strictly abides by the confidentiality and anonymity consideration of the research. This was done to protect their identity and the information are presented in such a way that prevent any disclosure of their identity. The flow of information also depends on the researcher assurance of confidentiality and anonymity. Silverman (2016) suggested that researcher has to go through layers of consent before she/ he starts the interview. This include seeking permission from village leaders including both political and religious leaders. This is particularly important in case of researching menstruation which has become a taboo subject to be discussed with outsiders as it is portrayed both in national and global media as “ill-practice”, “superstition”, “barbaric” and “exploitative”. Hence, getting acceptance from gatekeepers of community is essential to gain trust of the participants for further inquiry. Trust was gained not only through symbolic gestures but also through official explanatory form and consent form. Use of official document ensured that researcher and participants are in equal footing and backed by the document that bind the researcher for confidentiality and anonymity. Further steps like removing identifying information and using pseudonyms was taken to ensure protection of participants and their settings (Burgess, 1985; Tunnell, 1998).

Another challenging aspect of researching on menstruation especially “*Chaupadi*” is that it has been reported in the mass media as a sensational issue which many time can bring not only legal repercussion to the people engaged to it but can also bring social

distress and embarrassment to participants as well to the whole community (Gmelch, 1992; Greenberg, 1993; Rosaldo, 1989). Under these circumstances I took extra steps to anonymise the community by using pseudonyms for location and land marks or any symbols which can identify the village itself.

Another harm that can occur during ethnography is that the participant might experience anxiety, stress, guilt, and damage of self-esteem during data collection is that during data collection (Murphy & Dingwall, 2001). For I maintain the respectful tone, use consent form, but did not use any questions or issue or made any comments that can be taken as researcher judgment on the subject. During the stay in the field the I tried abide by the social and religious rules of the community. However, there was risk where the researches acceptance can be taken as approval of the practice. For this, when asked about my opinion I was truthful about my own practice and conveyed to the participant that as a student and researcher, I was there to study the practices and cannot pass any moral judgment nor I can recommend any. Another tool I employed is the assurance of voluntarism. According to which the participant will be informed that they can choose freely whether to participate in the study. And even when they gave consent in the beginning, they were made aware that they leave the interview at any time.

In case of research in *Chaupadi* prevalence areas similar confidentiality and anonymity was used. However, there was moral dilemma whether to report any *chapuadi* incident if I witness it. For this morale dilemma I found two strategies to deal with it. First, legally in Nepal it is not required to report the crime and there is no legal liability if it is not reported. The second strategy is inspired by strategies adopted many Journalists reporting on sensitive issues or events. This include moral judgement where they only report the incident if there is eminent danger to life else, they give priority to documentation believing that it will bring attention of wider community leading to possible real. However, in the field I did not observe any participant moving or residing in the cow-shed.

### **3.5 Methodological Reflection**

In research, the “subject” and the “context” of the research is considered the primary area of interest whereas challenges (ethical dilemma as well as emotional toll) faced

by the researcher while doing research are either considered trivial or remain unspoken and unexplored (Punch, 2012; Hanna, 2019; Taquette & Souza, 2022). However, in qualitative research, the researcher's positionality; her ontological belief; her ethical and moral compass as well as her ability for critical reflection including reflexivity, plays a crucial role in the quality of qualitative data being collected and the way she analysed the data (Holmes, 2020). In this regard this chapter aims to contribute to the methodological debate by exploring the positionality, dilemmas, and toll of researching sensitive issues and how the fieldwork can have an impact not only on the well-being of the researcher but also can have a long-term shift in the researcher's belief system and menstrual practices. In this paper, I reflect on my field experience between March-July 2019 in Kanchanpur, Jumala, Dailkeh, and Achham district undertaken during this thesis. During the field work I kept the extensive record of my experience in the field which include not only the reflection on the interviews, records about participants, "field", but also the challenges, frustration, and ethical dilemma I faced as a researcher in the field.

### **3.5.1 Entering "field" as a Menstruator**

In Achham one of the staff from Health post who was from Teria area disclose that the first time when she came to Achham she faced difficulty in finding the room for a rent as families feared that she belonging to Teria region won't be stringently practicing menstrual restriction as prescribed the local norms, when I interviewed her, she was living in the room above the health post which was the government building. As a menstruator in the field, the menstrual status of us has become point of concerns not only for the participants we have been interviewing but also the families I was staying with. In Kanchanpur After few days of stay landlady approached me with certain caution and said

*"I know that in Kathmandu women do not observe the menstrual restriction. But we follow it diligently. So, during your stay if you get menstruation, please inform us. We will arrange separate bed and utensils for you. Please don't hide it. If you hide it there will be bad incidences and our dhama will find out about it". (Diary, 22 March 2019).*

During my stay, one of their goats got injured and I was worried that they might think that I was hiding my menstrual status and caused these misgivings or even worse

invite their *dhami* and what if he declares me as a culprit of not following the menstrual practices.

Similar incident happened in Accham as well where the day after interviewing the local priest he had an accident where he fractured his leg, that still invoke some insecurity in me as I worried if someone link that incident to my presence. This worry also came from interviews where participants shared cases where local *dhami* has linked the family misgivings and even natural calamity to lapses in the menstrual practices and sometime with consultation to local *dhami* they will identify the menstruator who failed to observe the practices. Incidences like above made me worried, thinking– what if any of such misgivings get linked to my visit and what possible social repercussion it can have on us.

### **3.5.2 Fear of “Divine wrath” – Psychological fear**

During field visit, I observe many local rituals where I could see local *dhami* or villagers going into trance, one *Shadhu* after his interview gave his blessing and immediately went to trance and violently fell on the temple floor. He shared that the devi was happy with the presence but it was an “scary” experience particularly as the temple was in the middle of jungle and on my way back I could see several places with red clothes, make-up items and fake jewelries, where the villagers have performed rituals to appease the local devi which was linked to menstrual women seeking forgiveness to the *bandevi* who the local claimed that has possesses the menstruating women if there is any lapses in her observation to menstrual exclusion. This on normal day time when you are in with group of people was not at all scary but in Kanchanpur the village I have stayed had a thick jungle and one day I was late to come back from the interview and it was full moon as I was crossing the jungle and the wind was blowing hard and I could sense fear in me and shudder with the thought of being possessed. When I reach the place, I took a breath of relief but wonder if all the story of possession, divine wrath and so many visual signs of ritual being performed, physical marker, might trigger something in me. What if I experience trance, it would not be strange to experience that in that village but would not that be scary and be embarrassing if my supervisor finds out that I was experiencing such fear.

In another incident in Jumala, I was interviewing the *Dhami* and his friends were keen to show his long Jutta and forced him not only show the long *jutta* but also asked me to touch it. Jutta of the *dhami* is considered to be sacred and after being *dhami* it is believed that hair of *dhami* slowly turned into Jutta which grows and looks like a dreadlock. *Dhami* decorates it with gold and silver wire offered by his followers and only after his death the *jutta* will be cut off and later will be attached with the *jutta* of new chosen *dhami*. In that incident after viewing and touching the *jutta*, *Dhami* suddenly got upset and said that if the menstruating women touch his *jutta* she will be burned instantly and turned into ashes. At that moment I did say that I was not menstruating and assure them that I do understand the local norms and as a researcher there is no point for me to breaking the norm but the turning into ashes part remain with me. I still have not processed its impact but the experience and the raw fear I experienced in the field allowed me to empathize with the fear the menstruator from the field were experiencing and how breaking the norm is not only socially difficult but also have huge psychological toll on them.

### **3.5.3 Ethical dilemma**

I spend more than three months in the field, so it is obvious that at least three times I experience menstruation in the field where menstrual practices were different from my own practices. Ethical dilemma was that for the participants menstrual status of the women was associated with ritual impurity and according to them have real consequences. So, the question was whether to disclose my menstrual status or not, or whether I should take interviews during my menstruation or not. This can be very interesting ethical reflection; I have read articles and thesis when menstruator either because of long stay in the single place or to experience had to disclose their menstrual status (Khanal, 2019) but my stay was never more than 15 days in one place. As a result, I was never in the situation where I had to disclose my menstrual status. In three months, field visit and in four different places I never had to disclose my menstrual status but my respect to the person and may be some fear I did observe minimum menstrual restriction like avoiding religious place visit or interviewing *dhami* when I was having. During my field work many of the participants claimed that even talking about menstruation was making them sick and during interview one of the participants coughing so hard that I had to stop interview and wait for 5-6

minute for him to drink water and take rest. Many women participants who claimed to possess the healing capacity said that they can enter trance if the menstruating women touch them as her deity won't accept that. Listening to their claim, it was difficult for me to go against their norm.

#### **3.5.4 Practical Problem**

With fear and ethical dilemma, there were practical issues when you enter a space as a menstruator where menstruation is ritually impure and practice with restriction. First of all the availability of menstrual product, except one place all three place did not have menstrual product to be purchased from the local shop and even if it is available in one location buying those product would disclose your menstrual status and might limit your access to participants and your mobility. As a result, it was mandatory for you to bring menstrual product with you. Another aspect is that if you use clothes, where you will wash and dry the them. Again, it will disclose your menstrual status. During field visit I usually use menstrual pad but the practical concern that came with menstrual pad is its disposing it. Unlike urban areas where you have garbage collector, most of the rural area household manage their own garbage but throwing menstrual pad in the household garbage was never even was the consideration and out of fear I used polyethene bag to collect the pad and dispose it in hotel where I took rest between each filed visit. In one site where the stay got little longer and it was hot, I travel to district headquarter to dispose the menstrual pad as there I and my garbage had some anonymity. Practically few might suggest menstrual cup but it was not familiar to me plus the clean toilet was a rare thing in the places I stayed in. But the fear leakage was always there, however unlike urban settings where leakage could bring embarrassment the leakage in places where menstrual restriction is observed stringently can compel you to observe such restriction.

#### **3.5.5 Questioning the Ontology**

Menstrual restriction in the communities I visited is based on the otology that believes that menstruation is linked with ritual impurity and linked with divine wrath. Even though as feminist and individual from ethnic community, the believe in linkages between ritual impurity and menstruation was never my ontological belief. However, with continuous exposure to the discourse of ritual impurity and menstruation in

Hindu community, I started questioning my own menstrual practices specially in relation of statues of Hindu deities at my home. Even though I only have few statues of Hindu deities, but listening of Hindu families and realizing how important it was for them to observe menstrual restriction I wonder if it was fair for me to have the Hindu deity statue and not to practice menstrual restriction, which appear to be one of the core practices to be observed by the Hindu women. And how to revolt against the Hindu text which is static. More obedient side of me did not see any point of revolt instead I tried to secularise all my ritual where the Hindu deity statue only represented the Hindu belief where I still have not defied the menstrual restriction prescribed by the Hindu religious text. However, this question “is menstruation ritually impure or sin or Hindu god reject the menstruating body” will be the most relevant ontological stand to answer. In one of the recent visits to Accham one 12-year-old girl asked me “if the god actually think menstruating bodies are impure and sinful” and I think this is the basic ontological question we need to answer if we ever want to question the menstrual restriction in the study site.

In section 3.5 present the methodological reflection especially my experience as menstruator doing research on menstruation. In first section I reflect on entering field as menstruator where menstrual practices are rigid and very different from my own practices. In second section I explore the psychological impact of the challenging field on the researcher. Third section present the ethical dilemma of the researcher in the field where the researcher’s belief and practice are in sharp contrast with participant and the researched community. In fourth section I briefly explore the practical problem a menstruator faces in her field work where menstruation and menstrual status of the menstruator is of. And the last section I present the ontological shift a researcher can have after the research experience. With the above discussion while entering the field, researcher cannot stay in isolation but get deeply intertwined in the field where not only her practices get shaped in the field but also field has profound impact not only on her ontology but also on her mental wellbeing. Other practical issues of field also reflect on how the field experience is shaped by the researcher gender and her bodily status as well as ethical dilemma she might face due to differences in the interpretation of ethics by researcher and research community which contrast with each other specifically their ethical view on the status of the menstruation.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **MENSTRUAL PRACTICES AMONG HINDU FAMILIES OF WESTERN NEPAL**

Menstruation is the indication that women body is fertile and capable of carrying child which is one of the essential biological processes that ensure the continuation of the human species. However, menstrual practices had been culturally framed where in global north it is associated with Shame and secrecy (Winkler, 2020) whereas in South Asia it is associated with ritual impurity (Amgain, 2011; Das, 2008; Nagarjan, 2007; Sridhar, 2019; Leslie, 1989; Bennett, 1983; Chawla, 1994). In this chapter I explore the meaning of menstruation within Hindu text as well as present contemporary practices in Hindu communities.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section presents the origins of menstruation and summarizes the normative menstrual practices prescribed by Hindu religious text. The second section present the contemporary menstrual practices of four Hindu communities of western Nepal. And the last section elaborates the socio-cultural structure that ensure the continuation of exclusionary menstrual practices.

The chapter aims to contribute to the menstrual discourse in Nepal which still looks the current exclusionary menstrual practices from a superficial glance of either through reproductive health perspective or from human rights perspectives. It suggests that legal interventions and awareness campaigns initiated to end the exclusionary practices that ignore the deep-rooted religious dogma and the social structures that maintain these practices will fail to achieve their goal unless they are developed from the local level and are contextual.

#### **4.1 Contemporary Menstrual Practices in Hindu Communities in Western Nepal**

Within Hindu communities of four districts, menstruating women were consistently deemed impure but the degree to which exclusionary menstrual practices was observed varied in terms of number of days menstrual exclusion has to be observed, space in which menstruating women can reside, their mobility and the task they can perform varied. The degree in which the rigidity of exclusionary menstrual practices

was practiced reflected by the fear or disdain the communities / authorities (religious – Dhama, Jhakari, Priest etc) have toward menstruation and to degree in which they have linked any misgivings to the lapses of menstruating women to observe the prescribed practices. In next section I will explore the knowledge system as well as the ecosystem where exclusionary menstrual practices are observed and continued by individuals and the communities. However, the table below present the summary exclusionary practices observed by menstruating women in five Hindu communities in four districts.

<b>Affected Activity</b>	<b>Menstruating women should not</b>	<b>When rules are broken</b>	<b>who does this apply to</b>
consume	consume milk products during menstruation	cows will produce less milk, will bleed from the udder, and will kick while getting milked.	all women in all four districts
	consume <i>bhog</i> (sacrificed animals and food offered previously to deities)	consuming sacred substances will cause illness to the menstruator	all women in all four districts
	consume water from holy water sources	consuming sacred water is expected to cause illness to the menstruator	Dailekh only
gaze	on male family members	menstruator causes sickness and shortening of lifespan in family members	during 8-11 days of menarche in all four districts
touch	non-menstruating individuals, especially male members of the family	menstruator is causing sickness in the person being touched	in all four districts, particularly in Accham where women socially distanced more than in all other parts
	holy people and all people who go into trance	menstruator causes sickness to persons sensitive to the affects of impurity	during menstruation in all districts.
	fruit-bearing trees and vegetables (except root and leaf vegetables).	menstruator cause fruit/vegetable to rot	
	utensils used in food preparation	consuming food from impure utensils causes illness	
	water sources and water containers	using or drinking water touched by menstruator will cause sickness	
	daughters and sons	where menstruators have to touch their young children eg where they breastfeed their children, the children need to be purified in the morning to prevent them from falling ill	In Accham.
	Cow	touching a cow. milking a cow or giving water to a cow while menstruating will cause illness to the cow	In all four districts
Pickles	preserved food will go bad if touched	In all four districts	

access	the kitchen	food served from a kitchen in which menstruating women have been will cause sickness to anyone consuming such food	During menstruation in all four districts
	entering their own house (Accham and some Thakuri in Dailekh) or the upper floor of their main house (Dailekh and Jumala), entering other rooms except their own (Kanchapur and Rolpa)	entering the house/upper floor of the house is believed to cause sickness or bring bad luck to family members, especially male members of the household.	
	Front yard		In Accham.
	Common family toilets		
	Common tap		
	enter a temple or holy site	entering a temple or holy site will cause sickness to the menstruator and will cause performed rituals to fail	
do	take part in rituals (marriage, ancestral rituals) and religious festivals. The restriction is extended to the husband of the menstruator in case of major rituals (death rituals of family members)	Rituals are not effective when a menstruator takes part.	In all four districts
	have sex	being sexually active during menstruation is thought to cause sickness and reduce the lifespan of one's husband	
	Put her marital sacred thread <i>dhago</i>	disobedience is thought to cause a shortened lifespan of one's husband	Thakuri in Jumla

**Table 4.1:** Observed Menstrual Restrictions in Jumla, Dailekh, Kanchapur, and Jumala in Hindu communities

## 4.2 Social Structure Upholding the Exclusionary Menstrual Practice

Continuation of social practices is ensured by the presence of a knowledge base that legitimize the practice and authorities who will interpret the knowledge making the practices both meaningful and with consequences to the practicing individuals and to the communities (Bam 2020).

### 4.2.1 Menstrual Practices: Knowledge, Authorities, and the Interpretation

During, field visit it was interesting to find at least one or two brahmin household in each community, responsible for carrying out the rituals. Although only handful

claimed to read the actual text and many even mixed up the name of religious books but each one of them knew the story of Indra's sin and its relation with menstruation. They were also aware of religious text that deemed menstruating women as impure and prescribed exclusionary menstrual practices.

*According to our scriptures, the origins of menstruation is associated with one of the biggest crime in hindduism "Brahama hatya". Lord Indra killed a brahamin and to atone his sin he divided his sin into three parts, one third of the sin is taken by women and every month the sin of brahamahatya comes out in the form of menstruation. This is the reason why menstruating women are considered impure and sinful. In first three days she is considered impure, first day she is a "chandal", second day is "dhobini" and on third day say is "dankini". Only on her fourth day after her bath she becomes pure. During these three days she is impure and any contact with her is dangerous for men. Intercourse with menstruating women make the men also "Chandal" and he will lose his age. Menstruating women should be avoided in all cases as her mere presence can impure the space itself" (Male, 56, Brahamin, Priest, Kanchanpur)*

It was interesting to see that in the research area, families seldom had any religious text or books in their household. The primary source of religious knowledge in these communities were priest, who were invited by the families and the communities to perform various rituals. These were the spaces and time where the textual knowledge of religious books about origins of menstruation and religiously prescribed menstrual practices gets transmitted by priest to women, families, and communities.

*"You see when women are menstruating, they are impure. They should not enter kitchen, or cook or serve food. They should avoid puja room and should not touch their husband. Only after five days and her bath she will be pure enough to touch her husband and can enter kitchen. However, to carry out dev karma (ritual related to god) she has to wait for 7 days and for pitri karya (ritual related to ancestor) she has to wait for 9 days, before that her involvement in such rituals are restricted".(Male, 52, Brahamin, Priest and School Teacher, Dailekh)*

Another source of knowledge for menstrual practices for local communities were *Dhami*. Unlike priest, *dhami* neither proclaim authority over the religious text nor perform any Brahminical rituals. *Dhami* are the spiritual head of the clan and consider to be the medium through which each clan have access/ guidance / communication with their local deity. In case of physical or psychological sickness or any misfortune, people from the communities visit the local *dhami* to find the causes for the sickness or misfortune and to seek appropriate atonement. In our interviews with *dhami*, all of them claim that menstruating women are impure and require to observe the menstrual restriction strictly.

*“If menstruating women touch me, she will be turn to ashes immediately”.*  
(Male, 73, Chetri, Dhami, Kanchanpur)

*“Look even talking about menstruation and menstruating women is making me sick. If I come near them or eat food made by them, I will be severely sick. Our deity won’t accept any lapses from menstruating women”* (Male, 38, Chetri, Dhami, Kanchanpur)

However, when asked why only women menstruate? or Why menstruating women is considered impure? They responded with either surprise or annoyance on such a silly question. They did not have elaborate stories of origin of menstruation or its linkages to sin. Even with their annoyance when we insisted on the answer. They always give one line answer:

*“devta lai subdaina (It is not acceptable to God/ deity)”.* (Male, 75, Thakuri, Dhami, Jumala)

Other source of knowledge or authority for exclusionary menstrual practices are individuals who are neither *dhami* nor priest but claim that local deity possesses their body. Hence claim to need higher purity from menstruating women. They claimed that if the menstruating women touch them or serve food to them, they get sick and only get heal with the interventions of either *dhami* or performing ritual like taking bath, sprinkling, or drinking cow urine and in extreme they need to perform small “puja” to ask for forgiveness from the local deity.

*“After bandevi possessed me I can no longer go to places and receive food. Many times, after going out I feel uneasy and sick. And I know that there must be someone who was menstruating. Now I have a bottle of cow urine in my*

*varndaha and once I am back either I take bath or take cow urine to purify myself. I have all together stopped eating out as well". (Female, 43, Tharu, Women elected ward member, Kanchapur).*

This section clearly shows that the priest who are more learned regarding the religious text about menstrual origins and restriction, spread that knowledge around the communities during various rituals or religious events. However, other authorities on menstruation might not know or read the actual text, but have authority to instruct the individuals, families and communities regarding menstrual practices or menstruating women as impure bodies make them significant source of knowledge. Their claimed power to see past and predict future, their healing power and power to know the underlying of causes of sickness or misfortune and ability to recommend and perform the purifying or atonement process makes them powerful authority who ensure the continuation of menstrual practices.

## **4.2.2 Menstruating Women under Surveillance**

### **4.2.2.1 Menstruating women under Divine Surveillance**

The above-described religious menstrual knowledge and its authorities put menstruating women in the centre of divine surveillance and divine justice/ wrath in case of failure to observe the prescribed restriction. It puts menstruating women in centre, having power of impurity so strong that any discretion can bring divine wrath to her, her male member of the family, other family member, livelihood (plant, crops, and livestock), community, cosmology and even after life. To avoid the divine wrath, it seems an obvious step for her, her family, and her community to make sure that the women abide the menstrual practices stringently. This I describe as a circle of curse or divine justice. This circle of curse or divine justice system is also used by priest and *dhami* to speculate the reasons of sickness or misfortune in the family or in the community. And suggest appropriate process for women, family and community to atone the sin. Interesting aspect of divine justice in relation to exclusionary menstrual practices is the belief that the women are in constant surveillance of God and any lapses even if no one else know about it. It will be noticed by the god and won't remain unpunished. There were several narrative and experience shared by participant that indicate that the belief in divine justice and surveillance is universally believed by

the community and individual women. Local deity like *Bandevi* in Kanchanpur, *Sannikot* devi in Accham, and various clan deities, including dead ancestors and other god / goddesses are considered to be the one involved in surveillance.

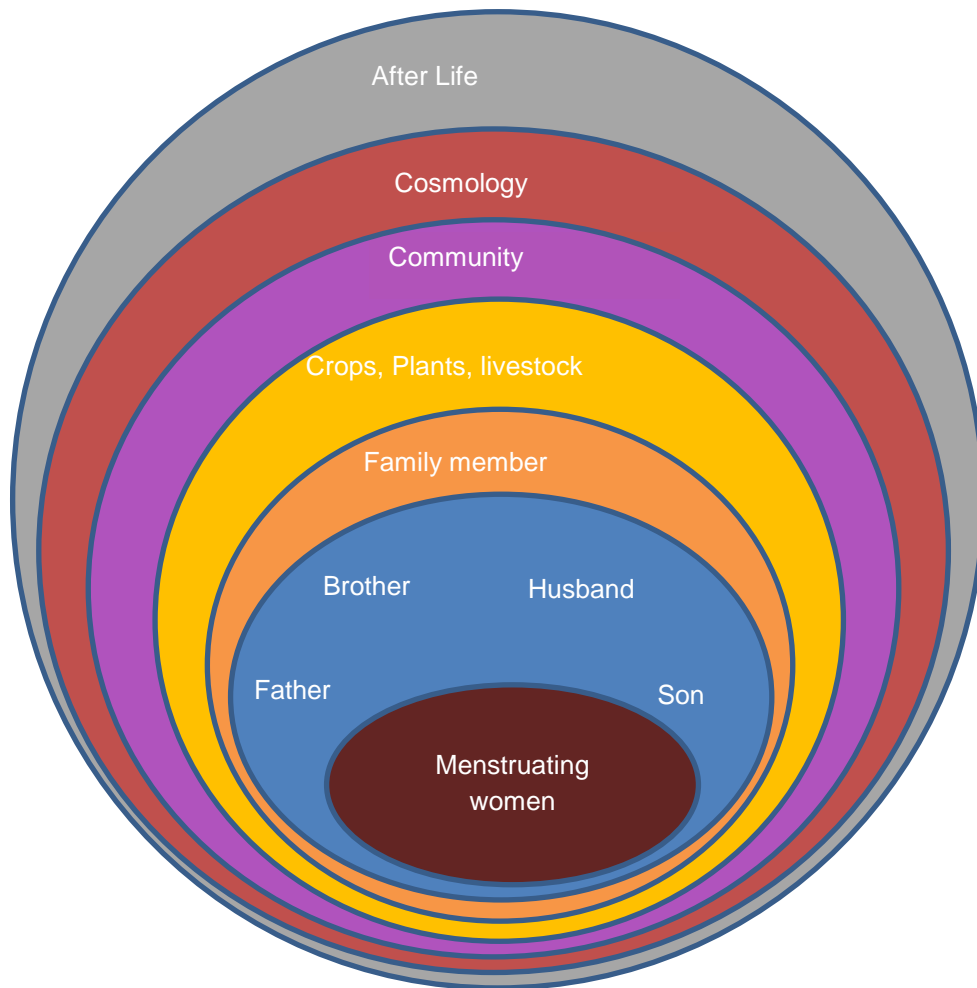
Another instance from Dailekh also highlights the belief of divine surveillance and women being the first point of divine wrath. Many of the participants from Thakuri community of Dailekh research site shared how the NGO initiative to reduce the number of days to observe menstrual exclusion from ten to seven was met by divine justice and the women had to face divine wrath where many suffered health problems of heavy bleeding and fainting. This only ended when they went back to their original menstrual practices.

Another interesting case was shared by Health teacher of locale village who claimed to have expertise to perform appeasing ritual for deity. He shared

*“At the back of our school there is a tree. It is considered to be one of the places where it is believed that deities reside. In our school we don’t have proper toilets, many girls will go to back to relieve themselves, making the place dirty. We did not know about it but once the girls started fainting and going to trance, we consulted dhamsi who told about it. And I performed a ritual to seek forgiveness from the deity at that place. Now girls also know about it and don’t go to that area to relieve themselves” (Male, 39, Magar, Health Teacher, Kanchanpur)*

Similar incident happened in Jumala as well

*“In our school we don’t observe any menstrual restrictions. However, two years back there was an incident when several young female students started to faint in their classroom. We got very worried and invited the local dhamsi. He told us that menstruating women were passing by the “devta than” located near the entry of the school gate and make the “devta” angry. He suggested that we sacrifice “patho” (a goat) and perform a “puja” in the school, which we did. Even though we did not suggest anything to our students but I have observed that after that incident many girls enter the school using alternative path. I am assuming that these girls are menstruating.” (Male, 63, Thakuri, Headmaster, Jumala).*



**Fig: 4.1** Circle of Divine justice for Menstruating women

#### 4.2.2.2 Menstruating Women under Social Surveillance

In above section I provided the detail on how if menstruating women do not observe exclusionary menstrual practices, they will be the first person to face the divine wrath. In this section I elaborate on how divine justice around Hindu menstrual practices, put menstruating women in center having power of impurity so strong that any discretion can bring divine wrath to her male member of the family, other family member, livelihood (plant, crops, and livestock), community, cosmology and even after life. To avoid the divine wrath, it seems an obvious step for her, her family, and her community to make sure that the women abide the menstrual practices stringently. The circle of curse is also used by priest and *dhami* to speculate the reasons of sickness or misfortune in the family or in the community. Based on which they also provide appropriate process for women, family, and community to atone the sin.

As discussed in previous section, women and community of the research site are aware of the stories from religious text like *Swasthani varta katha*, *Garud Puran* etc that associate discretion in menstrual practices to misfortune to women, family member especially male member and to afterlife. Participant from Kanchanpur, Dailekh, Accham, and Jumala shared several practices that are in-line with the religious text.

They shared that during first menstruation young girls are sent to distant relative's house or will be hidden to avoid her facing her male relatives of family and many time even her mother. In earlier times they shared that even the site of their main house was also avoided believing that it will bring bad luck to the family. Women also shared that during menstruation they avoid any physical contact with others especially male member of their family (who have undergone *bartabanda* – initiation ceremony for boys that mark their shift to manhood/ adulthood), including no intercourse with their husband, they don't cook food, carry water, or touch water sources, touch plants, touch /milk cow including buffalo whose milk has been offered to deity. These exclusions are based on belief that touch of menstruating women impure the space, items, animals and human causing them to go bad or sick or impure for any consumption or use for rituals. This was consistent across the five districts but practice in varying degree especially in Hindu families and communities.

Forty-three-year-old women from Kanchanpur shared

*“For first menstruation we hide our daughters to distant relative. Hidden from her father and brothers for 11 days. It is believe that if she looks at them either they will be sick or their age will be reduce. During other times, we avoid touching male especially who have undergone bratabandha and maintain safe distance.” (Female, 43, Brahamin, Housewife, Kanchanpur).*

When asked if she have intercourse with their husband during menstruation, the first response was of surprise followed by laughter. She shared

*“ If we cannot touch the husband, how can I have intercourse with him at that time. Not only humans we don't touch plants like fruit bearing plant believing that it will go bad, we don't touch cows else it will either stop giving milk or blood will come out of her udder” (Female, 43, Brahamin, Housewife, Kanchanpur)*

Thirty-eight-year-old women from Achham shared a detail on how a family can atone for sin incurred due to lapses in menstrual practices. She shared

*“Our cow was sick, she stopped giving milk and even kicked if I went near her to collect it. So we consulted local dharmi, he told us that menstruating women from our family were careless and touched the cow. And in order to purify he suggested us to perform a ritual, which involved worshipping a cow by five Kanya (girls who have not had their period yet) , bathing the cow with water collected from five different sources and acheta. We did that, our cow got better” (Female, 38, Chetri, housewife, Achham).*

Similar procedure was shared by participants from Dailekh, Jumala as well. Even though, no one shared their personal experience where they have linked lapses in their menstrual practices to sickness or wellbeing of male member but it was repeatedly shared that they absolutely observed prescribed menstrual practices, believing in impurity status of menstruating women and her ability to bring harm to their male member of the family. While reflecting I feel that for women it was easier to admit that how their lapses brought trouble to self but it will have major consequences to admit that their lapses brought harm to male member. In my observation and reflecting on interviews it was beyond their imagination to even question the premises or have casual attitude or experiment toward the menstrual practices particularly when it comes to the well-being of male member. The only experiment some women did was in their young age when they got curious and tried to touch plants to see if the go bad. Twenty-three women shared her experiment

*“I heard that if menstruating women touch the plant, it will go bad. At that time, I was young and was curious to see if it really happens. So, in secret I actually touched a plant while menstruating. To my surprise nothing happened to the plant. That was the only time I tested the rules”. (Female, 23, Chetri, housewife, Achham).*

The fear and belief in divine wrath is deeply held by women, families, and communities. Hence, not even in private sphere or in secret women don't question or challenge the practices. Family and community member who deeply believe in the practices as well, hardly have to discipline the menstruating women. However, with massive awareness campaign by NGOs and learning from school, the young generation of women has started expressing their doubts in the practice and created

suspicion in older generation. The suspicion has resulted in fear among the villagers and any misgivings in the village, natural calamity or even appearance of wild animals or snakes in the village is associated with the lapses of menstruating women in observing rigid restrictions. This was clearly reflected in the interview with one of the older women from Achham who was particularly unhappy with the anti-*Chaupadi* campaign and feared that younger women were not practicing the menstrual restriction stringently. She complained

*“Nowadays younger women are less cautious about observing the restriction as. A result we have now frequent hailstorm in village, more wild animals are coming to the village, and last year our crops failed. (Female, 63, Dalit, House wife , Achham).*

Paranoia about the women not observing the restriction was so high and the believe that it was causing all the misgivings in the village, the same women shared that in previous year the villagers performed “*Mahaygya*” in local deity temple seeking forgiveness. These public narrative of divine punishment to the entire community due to the lapses of individual women will crush any modification in the practices that women might be doing in their private spaces and will promote women strict adherence to the community prescribed rigid menstrual practices.

### **4.3 Conclusion**

In above section I presented origins of menstruation in Hinduism and menstrual practices prescribed by old Hindu religious text. I also presented the contemporary menstrual practices in Hindu communities of four research site, as well as provided in-depth analysis of context where I shed light on authorities, knowledge and reinforcing narrative that ensure the continuation of the exclusionary menstrual practices.

However, if you compare the prescribed menstrual practices in old Hindu text and contemporary menstrual practices you can see the variation not only in practice but also variation among different research site. Narrative from field shows that it is handful of religious leaders i.e. priest who knows the exact origins of menstruation and its association with sin in the Hindu text. However, most of the participant knew that in Hinduism menstruating women are considered impure. Similarly, the elaborate punishment prescribed in religious text is converted into simple punishment system where menstruating women from her discretion in menstrual practices can bring

punishment to herself, male member of her family, her family, her families wellbeing, community and even to cosmos. The punishment in after-life was not mentioned in the interviews but the communities which observed *Rishipanchami varta* or *Swasthani varta* (Kanchapur), women were aware of the afterlife punishment as well and they diligently took *Rishipanchami varta* annually to atone from all the sin accrued by her, due to lapses in menstrual practices in previous year.

I have also presented belief system of divine punishment/justice system where women are center or first point of punishment for not observing exclusionary menstrual practices. And her discretion will impact her extended existence – from male member to other member of family, livelihood, community, cosmology and after-life of herself and her husband. By presenting the menstrual practices as a part of belief system is the attempt to challenge the conclusion of many research papers including the superficial assertion of many men from the research site as well who claim that it is only women who are responsible for the continuation of these exclusionary practices. These claims fail to understand the elaborate narrative of sin and impurity with punishment system where it's the women who have to face not only the personal repercussion but can be accused of any misgivings that might happen to her family member, livestock, community or even to climate. Not only the fear but her "*stridharma*" where she is instructed to perform her womanly duty by observing pious nature to protect her husband and her family sharply contradict any narrative or intervention that instruct her to abandon exclusionary menstrual practices as the Hindu menstrual practices claim that it will bring harm to her, her husband, her family member, community, and after life.

## CHAPTER V

### MENSTRUAL PRACTICES IN FLUX

Uproar following the ruling of Supreme court of India which overrule a ban on preventing women and girls of menstruation age from entering Sabarimala temple in Kerala, got huge international media attention including of scholars (Sridhar, 2019). This attention only reinforced the common discourse in the field of menstrual studies and religion where the menstrual practices has been examined from the perspective of either oppression/ empowerment duality or present the religious dogma as a rigid structure with no space for negotiation or change (Sharma, 2014). And the only way out is the complete abandonment of the religious belief system. This believes has colonial roots which views women from global south from binary perspective of victim/ rebel dichotomy and instead of viewing its religion as a living and adaptive system of belief and practices, it presents the religion as rigid belief system where its member has no agency or power to negotiate or the practice which is independent of any changes in the society (Mahmood, 2001).

Even-though in the researched communities' religious text as well as the menstrual practices still identifies menstruating women as impure and are banished from the realm of God however changing socio-economic context like migration, changing family structure, increasing discourse of women rights, limited labor force etc has created tensions within the social fabric and need of adaptation has risen. This has resulted in adjustment as well as introduction of new strategies within menstrual practices as well as re-negotiation or change of menstrual practices within families, communities and even with religious authorities including God. In next section I present various context in which menstrual practices got changed or negotiated.

In chapter 4 I presented the contemporary menstrual practices which is the snapshot of the current practices and might present the practices as rigid. However, when the practices are reflected over the course of time as well as in different context, it appears the menstrual practices does have adaptive in nature where not only the context but in few times women, families and communities have taken active role in negotiating menstrual practices. In next section I present various context in which individuals, families and communities have altered the menstrual practices and reflect

on negotiation carried out by individuals, families, and communities around menstrual practices. Like many practices, menstrual practices also reflect the underlying social belief system as well as the social structure (Khadka, 2014; Bam, 2020; Amgain, 2011; Subedi & Parker, 2021). And any change and alteration in social belief system or in structure is reflected in the way the practice is observed (Bam, 2020; Archer, 2020; Giddens, 1979). Data from four districts shows the contexts under which menstrual practices have been changed- Education; Migration; And external intervention in the community. These contexts provided space for the individuals, families, and communities to alter the practices to reflect the changing context.

## 5.1 Education

Education can be of different forms; in this section I have categorised three sources of education that led to change in menstrual practices – School education; religious institutions; And peer learning between communities.

### 5.1.1 Changes due to schools

In school curricula, education about menstruation starts at grade 5 which is basically cover the changes in the body, its only in grade 8 the full biological process related to menstruation is covered. This education is complemented with several awareness campaign by NGOs which emphasizes on menstruations biological process and menstrual hygiene. Knowledge about menstruation as biological process to younger generation is in sharp contrast to older generation who even though aware of its linkages to reproduction but their awareness is heavily dominated with impurity and sin narrative, this has created generational gap where younger generation has started questioning several narratives of divine wrath or relevancy of some restrictions.

Another interesting case was shared in the family of *Jhakari* from Rolpa. Fifty-eight-year-old *Jhakari* shared that now he does not treat sickness related to menstruation. He said that

*“Sickness can be cause by two things, either it is bodily imbalance or it can be caused by unsatisfied soul or unhappy deity. And as a Jhakari I deal only with later two”.*

*(Male, 58, Magar, Jhakari, Rolpa)*

His wife shared interesting conversation, she said that

*“Nowdays I don’t even know if my daughter-in-laws are menstruating or not. When I tell them that “Baje” is Jhakari and he needs purity. They argue back that menstruation is not impurity, it is the process of flowering. and instead of observing the restriction they tell me that I should stop bothering them and let them bloom. All this they have learned in their schools” (Female 53, Magar, Housewife, Rolpa).*

Later, I learned that her daughter-in-law was not only female community health volunteer but studying to be a nurse (CTEVET). Similar, debate was seen in Achham during focus group discussion between group of younger women who have attended schools upto SLC and older women. When the older women were sharing about the restrictions and possible repercussion of not practicing it rigidly, the younger women started shouting and making fun of the older women saying

*“All these gossips of more wild animals coming to village is a lie. Menstruation is simple biological process. All these older women will wear sari and attend awareness program of NGOs. Even take oath not to practice the menstrual exclusion in their home. But once they are back to village, they won’t let us enter the house when we menstruate” (Female, 20, Dalit, Student-SLC, Achham).*

Even though in this case the young girls are still forced to practice the exclusion but the level of fear and understanding of menstruation as a sin was challenged by the learning they had in their school. And in future or if they migrate, many of younger girls admit they will not be hesitant to stop the rigid exclusionary menstrual practices.

Similar, thoughts were share by one of the young females from Kanchanpur. She shared

*“I know that menstruation is a biological process and have taken so many trainings and workshop around safe menstruation. But I am not able to abandon the practices, simply because I see so many people who claim to be getting possessed by the goddess saying that they are punished for their lapses in observing menstruation. This makes me worried” (Female, 23, Brhaamin, NGO staff, Kanchanpur).*

The data clearly reflect that female who have attended the school and received reproductive education view menstruation as biological process and have started questioning perspective which views menstruation as sin or impure.

### **5.1.2 Changes due to Peer learning between communities**

Many studies in menstrual restriction in Nepal assert that the severity of menstrual restriction is getting less over generation (Mishra, 214; Rothchild & Piya, 2020). However, this study shows that like many social practices, changes in menstrual practices is neither sequential nor its direction is always toward more liberal practices. In my field visit I have encountered two interesting communities one Tharu community in Kamanchanpur and another Muslim community in Dailekh. Both communities were residing in the village with Hindu majority and in presence of Hindu symbols, temples, sacred place, religious leaders, traditional healers, and families who observe exclusionary menstrual practices.

#### **5.1.2.1 Adopting Rigid Exclusionary Menstrual Practices**

##### **Influence of Hindu community on Tharu Community**

In Kanchanpur, the research site has an interesting history, it is a relatively new settlement with Hindu majority and most of them migrated from upper districts of far-western region including many leprosy survivors who converted to Christianity. The village also have significant Tharu community, many of them were former *Khamayias*. Here Hindu families practices rigid menstrual exclusion. While inquiring about the menstrual practices of tharu women, older women recall that in their times they did not observe any restrictions. However, while working as *Khamaya* for the families of Chetri and Brahamins "*Jamindar*" (Landlord) their "malik" will restrict menstruating tharu woman from the access to their homes, kitchen and water source. They also shared that during menstruation they were restricted to field work only. These restrictions were only limited to the private spaces and activities related to their landlord but in their private quarters they did not practice any restriction. Another older tharu women recall that since they did not practice any restriction her landlord called her "*jangali*" (uncivilized). Most of the Tharu women I interviewed still do not practice any menstrual restrictions and shared that in tharu community menstruation is equated with "flowering" and it is not interpreted as sin or impurity.

However, many participants has acknowledged that in recent years there has been increasing number of Tharu women being possessed by “*Bandevi*” or Hindu goddess “*Annapurna*”. And to appease the goddess, many them and her family have started practicing rigid menstrual practices like their Hindu counterpart.

One of such Tharu women who is also a ward member shared her story

*“ I need everything very pure. I don’t even eat at other people houses or in any functions. Because you never know if there has been any lapses in menstrual exclusion. If there is then I get sick immediately, I have headach, my throat get sore and have fever. It get only heal if I take bath. All this started few years back when I was very sick and in consulted our bharra and he said that this is related to menstruation and he can not do anything. And I have to consult hindu dhami and he told me that I have been looked by bandevi and she needs purity. From that day even at my house I observe strict menstrual restriction and I am especially careful of the food I eat outside” (Female, 43, Rana Tharu, Ward member , Kanchanpur).*

Similar story was shared by nineteen-year-old Tharu women who claimed that she was possessed by Hindu goddess Annapurna and now not only she has to observe strict menstrual restriction but her family also had to observe menstrual restriction and other restrictions like restriction from consuming alcohol and meat product by her family member as well citing that she with Hindu goddess needs more “purity”.

### **Influence of Hindu community on Muslim Community**

Another interesting case is of Muslim community in Dailekh. Muslim community leader share that their history in Dailekh is almost from 16-17 century old. He recalls

*“In old times there was no proper communication channels and roads, hence the muslim community in Dailekh has very loose connection with wider muslim community. As a result we lost many of our culture, knowledge and practices associated with our religion and started adopting hindu practices.” (Male, 58, Muslim, Muslim leader, Dailekh)*

This was visible in attire of older women who were wearing “*cholo*”, dhoti and even wearing jewelries like *tilhari*, *bulanki* which is traditionally worn by Pahade Hindu

women. In our interviews older women shared an interesting story on how in earlier times Muslim community from the village started worshipping Hindu deity

*“ There was a muslim cloth traders who visited this place. And he saw a stone which he took it as a normal stone. People from the village told him that this is sacred stone and he need to worship it. But he refuse to do so. And later he lost all his clothes. He was punished by the god. ” (Female, 52, Muslim, House wife , Dailekh).*

And in fear the Muslim community started worshiping local Hindu God as well. Her logic was simple “Even though we believe in single god. But you have to accept the power of local god as well”. Accepting the god was extended to accepting the menstrual exclusionary practices as well. Older Muslim women from the community shared that earlier they observed menstrual restriction similar to Hindu women in the communities. One of the participants shared

*“We did not cook food, fetch water, and even stay in separate place during menstruation. During menarche I was hidden from my parental family just like in hindu families”. (Female, 32, Muslim, Teacher, Dailekh)*

The above cases shows that when communities and families encountered practices which either associated to “civilized” practices or alleviate their social status or expose to practices and experiences that enforce and reinterpret the practice through new perspective than the families and the communities will adopt not only the practice but also corresponding values in their daily life as well.

### **5.1.2.2 Abandoning Rigid Menstrual Practice**

In our field visit to Kanchanpur, Rolpa and Dailekh we observed that introduction of new religion as well as reintroduction of religious text resulted in change in menstrual practices.

In Kanchanpur I met women from Christian communities who were first generation convert and no longer practicing menstrual restriction. “Brother” in a church who was Newar married to dalit, shared that even though Christian communities is in minority and surrounded by hindu community who practice rigid menstrual practice. However, he with many Christian family no longer practice menstrual exclusion. When inquired about Bandevi and how even Tharu women are getting possessed, he replied

*“You see in case of Christianity we also have our devta, Jesus Christ. Christianity promises us that he will be always with us, protecting us and he is always present in our back. Since he is always with us and he is stronger, no bhut or local deity can take over us. Jesus is the most powerful one”. (Male, 39, Christian, Auto driver and Brother in local church, Kanchanpur)*

However, when inquired more he did admit that there are times when people get possessed or sick because of local deity. And that time local pastor performs exorcism to heal the sick individual. Another interesting narrative was shared by Dalit women who was the daughter of a leprosy survivor and a Christian. However, her husband parents were not Christian, she shared

*“ We don’t practice any menstrual restriction. However, my mother-in-law is visiting us and she is sick. I have not told her that we don’t practice menstrual restriction. She has been sicked a lot. We are hoping to take her to church, so that pastor can heal her. And convert her to Christianity as well.” (Female, 43, Christian, Housewife, Kanchanpur)*

Another women from the village who was also recent convert shared her story

*“ I used to get sick a lot. My children also suffered a lot of sickness. I went to several dhams but they failed to heal me. They failed not only to recognize the local deity causing the trouble but also fail to appease the deity. Once I went to Church and converted to Christianity, I got better. After that I flow my pastor and no longer observe menstrual exclusion” (Female, 29, Christian, Housewife, Kanchapur)*

Impact of religion is also visible in Dailekh. During our interview older women from Muslim community recall the time when they were also observing menstrual restriction similar to Hindu communities. However, this changed after 1990s. One older Muslim man recalls that with advent of democracy and better road connection in 1990s strengthen the connection of local Muslim community to Muslim community in Nepalgunj and wider Muslim network in Nepal. He recalls

*“Earlier we started to forget our own culture and we wore similar dresses as Hindus, we also worship their god but with better roads and communication our Mashjid have better contacts and communication with Mashjid in Nepalgunj. Initially we invited Maulwai from Nepalgunj for teaching and now*

*our own boys are their learning to be Maulwi” (Male, 58, Muslim, Business man, Achham).*

New *Maulwi* brought textual knowledge of the *Kuran* which altered the way Muslim communities observe various rituals as well as their daily practices. During our visit we could see the contrast in the way younger and older women dress as well where the younger women were wearing more traditional dresses prescribe by *Maulwi-Kurta Surwal* and covering their head with shawl where older women were wearing dhoti and cholo and many even wearing traditional Pahade hindu women jewelries like “*bulaki*”, *tilhari* etc. The new knowledge of religious text also altered the way women were observing menstruation. A 28-year-old Muslim women who was also working as Women health volunteer share that

*“Now we no longer observed rigid restriction as our hindu neighbor, menstruating women in muslim community now stay inside the house, perform the daily chores- cook food, serve food, collect and offer water.” (Female, 29, Muslim, Women Health volunteer, Dailek).*

She also shared that they have weekly gathering of women where she shares the learning of *Kuran*. She told me that

*“In Islam menstruating women are also considered “Napak” (impure), however restriction includes only few things like not touching the holy book of “Kuran Sharif” or prayer mat called “Mushala”,no sex, but they can prepare food for religious offering called “fatiya” except they can’t read “dua” (prayers) on it. And unlike hindus where there is strict number of days in Islam women regain their purity once the actual bleeding stops.” (Female, 29, Muslim, Women Health volunteer, Dailek).*

This section clearly indicates that when the women and the communities are offered with alternative well-structured belief system like alternative religion or presented with alternative explanation of the concept the taboo subject or practice is either deemed irrelevant or demystified. And hence provide individuals, families, and communities to either adopt, adapt, or abandoned the old practice.

## 5.2 Changes due to Migration

In case of migration, individual and families are living in two distinct communities, one is their home community and second is their host community where they have migrated temporarily. Studies on migration have shown that the new knowledge and products which migrant bring back to their home communities results in changes in practices (Lipton, 1980), similarly under new social structure, migrant may alter their practices to reflect the nature and structure of host communities as well (Sharma, 2014).

In this section I present changes in menstrual practices due to migration. Here, I am focusing only in the migrant, their practices in host communities and the changes in home communities specifically due to migration.

### 5.2.1 Changes in Home Community: New Product, New Knowledge

Studies in migration has shown that individual with exposure to other culture bring not only knowledge and value system but also products and technologies that can lead to changes in home communities (Lipton, 1980). In case of menstrual practices migration also brought small yet significant changes that altered the restrictions during menstruation. One of the older Brahamin women from Dailkeh told us that in her times women did not wore (or even have) underwear and to excessive leaking they would wear thick “dhoti”. She shared that during her times it was easy to recognize who were menstruating, as the back of the “dhoti” would be soaked in menstrual blood. She recalls

*“In our time you knew if woman was menstruating or not. They would be leaking. There will be blood all over the place where the menstruating women either sat or walked by. There will be flies behind her back. It was disgusting.”(Female, 66, Brahamin, Housewife, Dailekh)*

Introduction of simple underwear not only allowed women to have control over her bodily leakages but also gave some privacy resulting in increased mobility of menstruating women in public spaces and closer access to family space. Same women recall that

*“In our time menstruating women were not allowed anywhere near the house, they were not even allowed to come closer to front-yard. We felt so dirty and embarrassed to walk freely. We did not walk freely in village like these younger women. However, when men and women brought underwear from India. It changed everything. With underwear and “Phatka” (piece of cloth they used for menstruation), now you don’t know who is menstruating. There is no blood, no leaking or foul smell or flies following the menstruating women.” (Female, 66, Brahamin, Housewife, Dailekh)*

Similar was the experience of women from Jumala, Achham and Kanchanpur. Older women recall the time when either their husband or when they migrated to India, they became aware of product like underwear and how to put clothes in between underwear. Women from Jumala also recall the times when they use ash or cow dung to wash their cloth stained in menstrual blood and how with soaps it got easier to wash the cloths and the clothes were more cleaned.

Various studies have shown that migration allow individual to experience different social context, provide exposure of different practices or different interpretation/ ideas and knowledge (Lipton, 1980; Sharma, 2014; Kilkey, & Palenga-Moellenbeck, 2016). This exposure and experience allow the returnee to view his/ her practice in home community from different perspective and may even question the establish knowledge/ practice or status quo. This was also visible in perception toward menstruation. Health-post in-charge of Achham research site shared similar shift in his perception toward menstruation during his stay in Pokhara. He shared

*“For further studies I want to Pokhara and was living in a rented place. To eat I used to go to nearby restaurant. There I realized that the restaurant lady who also cooked food was never in menstrual break. I also saw that in Pokhara no one observed the rigid menstrual practices. At first I was bit nervous and surprise to see the casual attitude toward menstruation and I did not had any sever impact on me as well”. (Male, 34, Chetri, Health-post In-charge, Accham)*

During interview itself he questioned the established menstrual practices, he said

*“If the menstruation was really impure and dangerous it should have cause trouble in city as well”. (Male, 34, Chetri, Health-post In-charge, Accham)*

Many women in our interviews shared same shock when they migrated to Indian cities and how it forced them to rethink about all the fear that was associated with menstrual restrictions. Even-though none of the women acknowledge that this new knowledge was translated into modification of rigid menstrual restrictions in their villages but the reflection itself was the key starting point where the fear of unknown was reduced to great extent and provided space for them to temporarily suspend the practices during their stay in foreign land. One of the women participants who lived in Mumbai for some time expressed similar dilemma, she shared

*“I stayed in Andheri, Mumbai with my husband. I was shocked to see that there were no Chaugoth and you will even never know if the women are menstruating or not. During my stay there, I also did not observe the restriction however when I am back to village, its hard not to practice. Here everyone practices and believe in consequences of not observing the menstrual exclusion. But in Andheri, people did not care, it was just a normal thing”* (Female, 38, Dalit, Housewife, Achham)

Studies have shown that exposure from migration allows individual not only exposure to new knowledge but it led them to question the existing practices which can be the seeds of resistance as well (Sharma 2014). In Achham and Dailekh two mother shared the similar experience. Both of their daughter went for higher education to neighboring districts, one in Dhangadi and another in Nepalgunj. They both stayed in rented house and during their stay in city did not observe the menstrual exclusion and slept in the same room and in same bed as before. Both the mothers were worried that their daughters are now use to stay inside the house during menstruation, and for them if they come back to their home, it will be hard for them to stay in “Chaugoth” or in separate makeshift room. Mother from Achham shared

*“Now I get worried that it will be hard for my daughter to stay in Chaugoth as she used to stay in her own room and sleep in her own bed in Dhangadi. Nowadays, we plan her visit here so that her menstrual cycle does not overlap with her stay here. It’s difficult to go back to old practice for her”* (Female, 42, Chettri, Housewife/ Shop-owner, Achham)

### 5.2.2 Change in Practice while Living in Host Community

Migrant while living in host community many times not only take their practices, beliefs and culture and try to recreate the social structure like their home community, however, the host community social structure, its own practice and belief system many times either clash with the belief and practice of migrant's home community or have structure -physical or social that does not support the practices of migrants. Many of my participant who have temporarily migrated with their husband to number of Indian cities namely – Punjab, Gujarat, Mumbai etc or even migrated to neighboring district in search of work or higher studies shared similar experience of abandoning the exclusionary menstrual practices temporarily during their stay. In next section I present the various reason given by participant under which they temporarily abandoned the practices.

#### Out of God's Realm and Absence of Reinforcing Social Structure

Religious studies have shown that within the communities there is a geographical configuration that present the realm of God with varying need of purity and sanctity (Hervieu-Léger, 2002). Gray (2017) shows that within the realm of God, individuals are expected to follow certain practices however this changes when the individual or families moves out of the realm or move to the geographical location which has ambiguous status from the perspective of geographical configuration of purity.

A rigid menstrual practitioner from Kanchanpur shared the similar experience, He shared

*“When we are in village, we practice the menstrual exclusion rigidly. However, when I moved to district headquarter with my wife. We did not observe it. One was that we did not have any extra room but also, we were away. You see in our village we have powerful deities, bandevi we cannot have any lapses but when I am in district headquarter, it is far away. Even though I did not practice it due to practical reason but I did not feel extreme fear of repercussion as well”.* (Male, 39, Magar, Teacher, Kanchanpur)

Similar incidence was shared by Teacher in Dailekh who also provided priestly services to local community, he told us about the incidence when his local *dhami*

visited his daughters who were in Nepalgunj for higher studies. According to him, his daughters were menstruating but *dhami* avoided the question and received the food. The teacher himself express his surprise that *dhami* neither went to trance nor fell sick.

Another case where *Dhami* himself suspended the menstrual restriction, when he visited Kathmandu for his wife's treatment. I met him in Juamla, he had his long "Jutta" with silver and gold ornaments. He shared his tragic story of how he lost his first wife to cancer. During that time, he took her for treatment to Kathmandu and was her sole care taker. He shared

*"She was vomiting blood and after all the option ended in Jumala I took her to Teaching hospital in Kathmandu. In her last stages she was not able to take care of herself. And when she menstruated there was no one to help her. I knew that I was not supposed to touch her because I have devta in me. But I took the risk and cleaned her and change the clothes. Surprisingly neither I got sick nor devta came to my body. But I had no option and had to support my wife."* (Male, 46, Dalit, Dhami, Jumala)

However, he did admit that since then *devta* has not came to his body.

Studies have shown that in absence of reinforcing social structure, exposure to new practices and practicality also provided space for migrant to either abandoned, adapt, or suspend the practices from their home communities (Archer, 2020; Lipton, 1980). The experiences of many women from Accham who have accompanied their husband to Indian cities like Mumbai, Gujarat and even Punjab shared similar experience who temporarily abandoned the exclusionary menstrual practices during their stay in host communities. One old woman from Rolpa shared that with her husband she almost stayed 20 years in Punjab. When she first arrived there, she worked as a maid in Sikh family and was surprise that none of the women there observed restrictions. She added

*"While living in Punjab, I also started wearing surwal and kept clothes in between legs to stop bleeding out. There I was responsible for cleaning, cooking in the family I had to take care of my kids and cook for them also. So, there were no space or option to ask for time out from the maid work nor there was anyone else to take care of my family. So I did not observed restriction*

*and prepared food and enter the main house as well”. (Female, 62, Dalit, Housewife, Rolpa)*

Similar, was the experience of women from Achham. She admitted that while staying in Gujarat she did not observe the menstrual restriction. She prepared food for her husband and slept in the same room. When I inquired if she did not fear God for any repercussion, she did not provide any specific reason on why she did not face any divine justice, the only answer they gave was linked with practicality and prioritizing their men rest. She shared

*“There was only one room. In foreign land I cannot go outside and find separate location during menstruation. Beside there no one was observing any menstrual restriction. And my husband was working hard and usually came home late. I could not ask him to cook for himself and for me. So, during menstruation, there I stayed in the same room and cooked food” (Female, 32, Dalit, housewife, Achham).*

When inquired more she said that her husband also never questions her decision to cook during menstruation. Many studies have shown that in absence of reinforcing social structure, practices which are taboo or not acceptable in host communities, migrants usually either abandoned the practice if not permanently then at least for the time of their stay in host community. Participant from Achham also added

*“In foreign land you cannot expect to practice the same as you did in your village. There no one bled out, everyone was so neat and clean. The place where we live, we knew no one. In that place how can I find another place to stay during menstruation. Even if I wanted to, it was not possible. There I did not feel comfortable and secure enough to practice our culture”. (Female, 32, Dalit, housewife, Achham).*

### **5.3 Changes due to External Intervention: Government and NGO**

Changes in social practices can be caused by external interventions which either directly related to social practice or impact it indirectly (Archer, 2020). In this section I present external intervention both by NGOs and Government in the research site that altered the menstrual practices.

### Changes in “Chhaugoth”

Achham has become infamous for its “*Chaugoth*”, this for many feminists symbolizes exclusion and rigid structure of patriarchal oppression of women (Sharma, 2014). However, it is interesting to know that the “*Chaugoth*” where women are banished during their menstruation have undergone several changes in its size, structure, interior, location, and usages.

Many older generation men and women recall that only handful of families or clan have communal “*Chaugoth*” for their menstruating women. And most of the women from poor families either took shelter in more affluent neighbors “*chaugoth*” or took shelter in jungle, caves, make-shift bamboo shed or plastic bags. This was changed by the intervention of one of the INGO in 1990s when they built common rooms for menstruating women where they can come and share space with other menstruating women. One older lady recalls that

*“It was so much fun to be there. It was all women and we come along, cook food and many times will dance and sing together” (Female, 68, Chetri, housewife, Achham).*

However, all this change with the wave of AIDS disease where anti-aides’ initiative from NGOs had made the villager realize that the AIDS was linked with blood. And the same older women recall that this led to many women not going to common spaces during menstruation and the concept of communal menstrual space was abandoned.

Structure of menstruating space was again changed with government intervention in 1990s. Many older women recall the government initiative for WASH facilities and provided funds to build toilets in each house. Sixty-two-year-old women recall

*“The toilet built by government was strong and had empty space in the top. So many families decided to use the space for menstruating women and current structure of chaugoth was introduced”. (Female, 62, Chetri, Housewife, Achham)*

Another interesting change can be seen in the structure and content of the *Chaugoth*. During my field visit in Achham, one of the participants showed me her “*Chaugoth*” with pride and said

*“I have built my own chaugoth, it is big and comfortable. And it has door and the windows. It is safe with doors and proper windows I know that snake or insect will not enter here. And I also have electricity. And in night time if I have to use toilet, It is right under the chuagoth,” (Female, 32, Chetri, housewife, Achham).*

Similar, story was shared by another Chetri women. She narrated an incident where a son insisted one building better *Chaugoth* for his mother. She shared

*“Last year there was an accident in nearby house. The mother was sleeping in her chaugoth and suddenly it caught fire. There was no causality but the son got worried and this summer he built a new chaugoth using cements and added proper doors. This will be safer for his mother” (Female, 25, Chetri, Housewife, Achham).*

The above narrative indicates that the changing perception of women status in communities and families has led to better “*Chaugoth*” and it is not static structure that cannot be changed. Same sentiment was expressed by one older woman in Achham with a tinge of jealousy she said

*“Younger women are very lucky; they have all the luxury. In our days there was no chaugoth, only well to do families have there. We use to stay in jungle, under the tree and when it rained either use plastic bags or “doko”(made of bamboo shoots to carry grass). Nowadays everyone has Chaugoth” (Female, 68, Chetri, housewife, Achham)*

There are other changes due to shift in political landscape in the research site, this is covered in Chapter 6.

#### **5.4 Changes in Menstrual Practices via Negotiation**

Practices associated with religion are many times portrayed as rigid where its followers presented as if they have no power to either change or negotiate the practices they are observing (Mahmood, 2001; Sharma, 2014; Bruke, 2012). In this section I present an interesting case from Dailekh which shows the attempt of a

community to change the menstrual practices first through the initiative of NGO and then with its failure, community took the ownership of the change and seek to negotiate within the local power structure.

Within Dailekh research site, there is a Thakuri community where women observe menstrual restriction for ten days. When inquired local dhama shared

*“Our clan deity is Mahabo and he appeared in the land on his own. He is the most powerful and need more purity. This is one of the reasons in our community we observe ten days of menstrual exclusion” (Male, 53, Thakuri, Dhama, Dailekh).*

With its strict menstrual restriction, one of the local NGO in close coordination with women groups pursued the women to reduce the number of days from ten to seven same as other nearby communities. One of the women participants shared that the women from Thakuri community even started to observe the restriction only for seven days but this resulted in women getting sick. She shared

*“We started to observe the restriction only for seven days. But as soon as we did that, many of the women started getting sick. Many started fainting, many were suffering from heavy bleeding. It was almost all the women who got sick immediately. When we consulted our dhama, he told us that the deity was not happy and ask us to resume our old practice. In fear we abandon the seven-day practice and again started observing menstrual restriction for ten days.” (Female, 32, Thakuri, Housewife, Dailekh)*

However, when I visited the place the Thakuri community were in process of negotiation with clan deity to reduce the number of days. When inquired the reason behind the negotiation a Forty-two-year-old Thakuri women shared

*“It was getting difficult to observe ten days restriction.” (Female, 38, Thakuri, Female Community Health Volunteer, Dailekh).*

And her husband also added

*“It was getting hard for man. I have been to India and lived alone. And know how to cook food. But other men in the village don’t know how to cook food. And when your wife is menstruating, you become helpless as there is no one else to cook. I know some man whose wife bleed twice in a month, so it is like*

*twenty days in a month she is observing the menstrual restriction the poor fellow was helpless. Now you are working out and when you come home there is nothing to eat. You are forced to cook and you do care for your wife and cook for them as well. And it is too much for us. Ten days is too much”.*  
(Male, 42, Thakuri, Mill-owner, Dailekh)

They shared that to reduce the number of days for menstrual exclusion, women of the communities have observed “*Khadratri*” which requires them to stay all night worshipping the deity. Thakuri women who is also a Female community health volunteer share that

*“Through dhami local deity told us that he was protecting the community from ages and ask us to continue worshipping him and instructed us to observe two more khadratri in coming festivals. After which he will consider the request”.*  
(Female, 38, Thakuri, Women Health volunteer, Dailekh).

This is the unique instance as it shows that within Hindu community the presence of *Dhami* who claim to be possessed by the deity, community no longer have to rely on text only but can directly negotiate with deity to seek his approval to alter the practice.

However, local participant including *dhami* shared that this is not the first-time community have negotiated with local deity. *Dhami* from Thakuri community shared

*“In old times families were not allowed to have stone roofs as it was only used for temple. Later, community negotiated with local deity to get permission to put stone in the roof. And the deity agreed only in condition that we put new roof to the temple made of brass.”*  
(Male, 53, Thakuri, Dhami, Dailekh).

Another instance was shared by Dalit elected ward member, she shared

*“Earlier women during delivery and in postnatal period were confined to lower floors of a house where usually cows are tied. And one day a new mother was bitten by snake and the villagers went to dhami to negotiate better space for new mothers during restrictive times. And the deity agreed to allow the entry of mother to first floor where the kitchen is. And now new mother stays in kitchen with new born baby which warm and can cook their own food*

*whereas the adjacent room is use for cooking for other members of the family.” (Female, 38, Dalit, Dalit women elected ward member, Dailekh)*

Above mentioned cases highlight two important points that even in hindu communities where there are medium and instead of text, communities more rely on medium to seek the divine guidance, in that context individuals and communities do have the opportunities to negotiate not only way to appease the deity but also negotiate the practices.

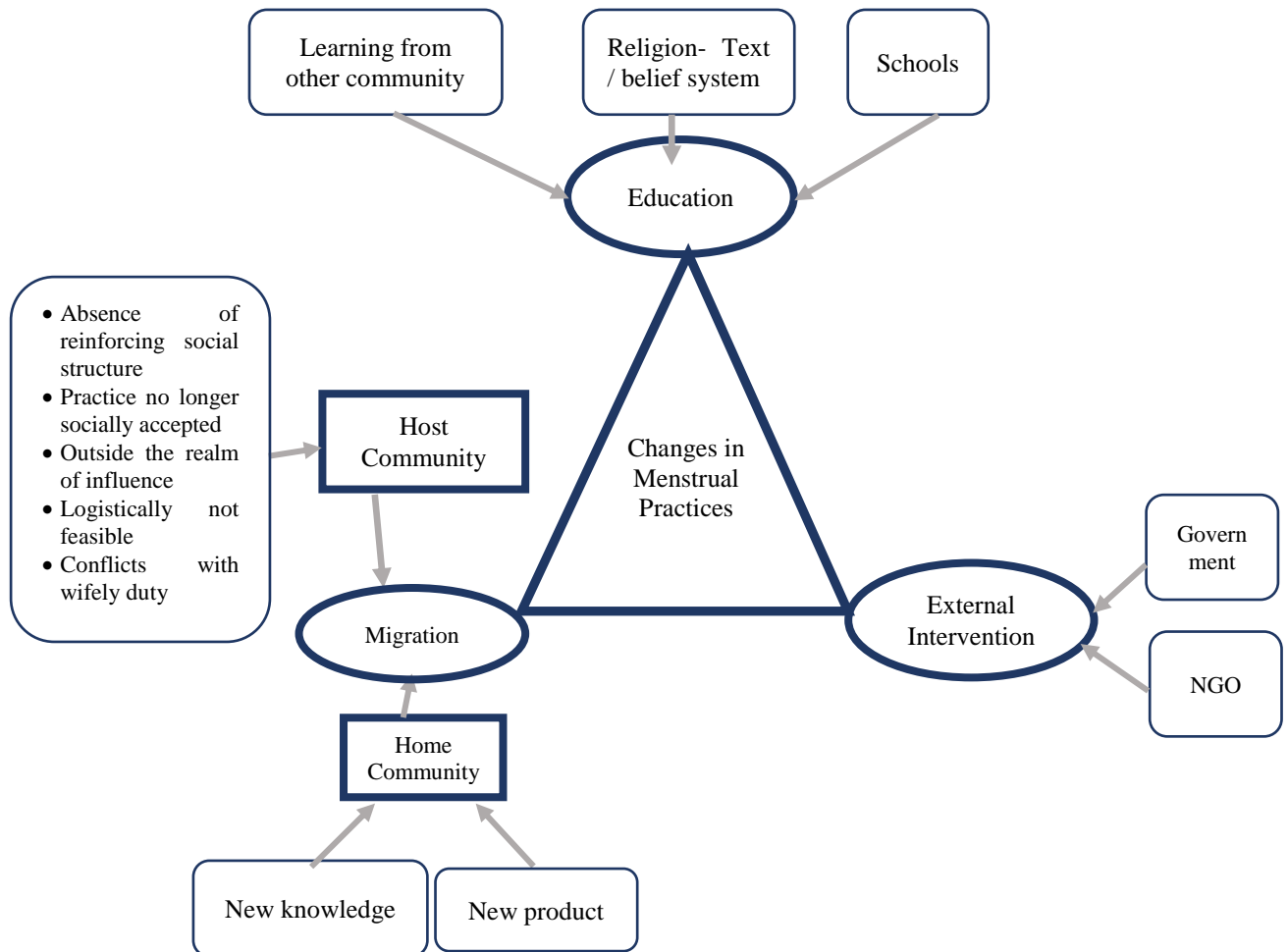
These narrative challenges the establish discourse which present religious practices as rigid and portrays its followers with no agency to negotiate.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

In this this chapter I present the narratives from field that challenge the discourse which present the exclusionary menstrual practices associated with Hindu religion as rigid and portray women and practicing communities without any agency.

In first section I present various context within which menstrual practices has been changed/ altered or abandoned permanently or temporarily. I present three prime forces for such changes / shifts. First is education, which not only include schools but also range of other institutions or learning that can shift in the way communities observe menstrual practices. This includes introduction of new religion, religious text and also learning from other communities and adopting their menstrual practices. Second is migration, with migration either the migrants bring new product and knowledge back to the home communities which shift the practices or either challenge or weaken the existing knowledge around menstruation which present menstruating women impure and can bring divine wrath. Another change in menstrual practice is experience by migrant when they are living in host communities, where they have abandoned or altered the exclusionary menstrual practices to minimum. Here I identify number of rational used by migrant for alteration in menstrual practices, they are – outside the realm of god, absence of reinforcing social structure, Practice no longer socially accepted, Logistically not feasible to practice it, and Conflicts with wifely duty. I also present cases that shows that hindu religion which is presented as rigid social structure has space for negotiation where communities have long tradition of negotiation with deity to alter the practices as well.

This chapter present the narrative from the field that shows that in contrary to dominant discourse around menstrual practice in districts of Sudurpaschim province, which portray it as rigid and individual or community with no agency, the menstrual practices like other social practices have undergone changes and many times open to reinterpretation and renegotiation.



**Fig 5.1:** Forces of change in menstrual practices

## CHAPTER VI

### MENSTRUAL PRACTICES WITHIN VARIOUS POLITICAL REGIME

As stated in Chapter 4, the understanding of menstruation within Hinduism goes beyond its biological interpretation and extends to its socio-cultural interpretation of “womanhood” or “*Stridharma*” in Hinduism. However, in last three decades Nepal has experienced a drastic socio-political shift from Hindu monarchy state to secular republic via a violent decade-long Maoist conflict (Jha 2014). These socio-political shifts provide three different socio-political paradigms/ regime, which views women and menstrual practices from contrasting ideology and hence interpret and reinterpret the menstrual practices, forcing women to navigate and negotiate the menstrual practices within the overlapping yet contrasting paradigm.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section briefly explores how Hinduism has shaped the menstrual practices of women where “*stridharma*”, culture of fear and blame with communal enforcement is used to continue the exclusionary menstrual practices in the communities. In second section I will present women’s narratives of recalling menstrual practices during the Maoist conflict period where the new Maoist revolutionary ideology advocated end of any practices that promotes gender inequality or so-called ‘religious superstition’. This section also includes the narrative of women on how they navigated between two conflicting paradigms- of dharmic system and revolutionary ideology of equality. The third section explores the menstrual practices in the liberal and secular democracy of the Republic of Nepal, where Government and NGOs has introduced various legal and public health guidelines and programs to shape the menstrual practices.

Based on the data, I argue that even though each paradigm presented different value system, however their top-down approach limited the women agency as they were forced to navigate between overlapping yet mutually exclusive paradigms. Resulting in women experiencing two extreme feeling of fear and shame while the practice remains exclusionary but moved to covert and private sphere by women and communities to avoid any criticism and interference.

## **6.1 Menstrual Practices within Religious system: Duty and Fear of Divine Wrath**

Menstrual practices within Hinduism and Hindu community is discussed in Chapter 4 in detail. Here I will present the summary of the practice only. Most women in Accham observed six days while women in Jumla, Kanchanpur and Rolpa mostly observed five days, and women in Dailekh observed to almost equal parts either 5,7 or 10 days of menstrual seclusion. Women cited a variety of reasons that determined the length of their separateness. Amongst the reasons were local gods and goddesses who required longer or shorter restriction periods within their realm. The life stages of women (unmarried, married, childless, with children) and caste further influenced the length of menstrual restrictions. Generally, high caste women observed more extended periods than others, mothers observed shorter periods than unmarried women, and women in households of religious specialists observed the most prolonged periods of restrictions. This is to say, rules varied. Women within our sample accepted their temporary impurity as a social fact. As women were concerned with the possible repercussions of accidental or intentional rule-breaking, the dharmic system of cosmic balance assures rule conformity from the women.

Rules and corresponding divine punishment were narrated consistently in interviews, and behavior was largely internalised. Observing menstrual restrictions was seen by women in the field as a way to take care of one's own health, the health and longevity of one's husband and children and to assure the well-being of the family. All Women practiced some form of restriction to avoid damaging livestock or angering the gods or religious specialists. Challenging religious rules and guidance through non conform practice was perceived by our informants as a risk not worth taking. On the other hand, pleading with religious leaders and elders to alter rules was perceived as a permitted strategy towards risk mitigation. Over time, individual women and groups of women were thus able to renegotiate the terms of their restrictions.

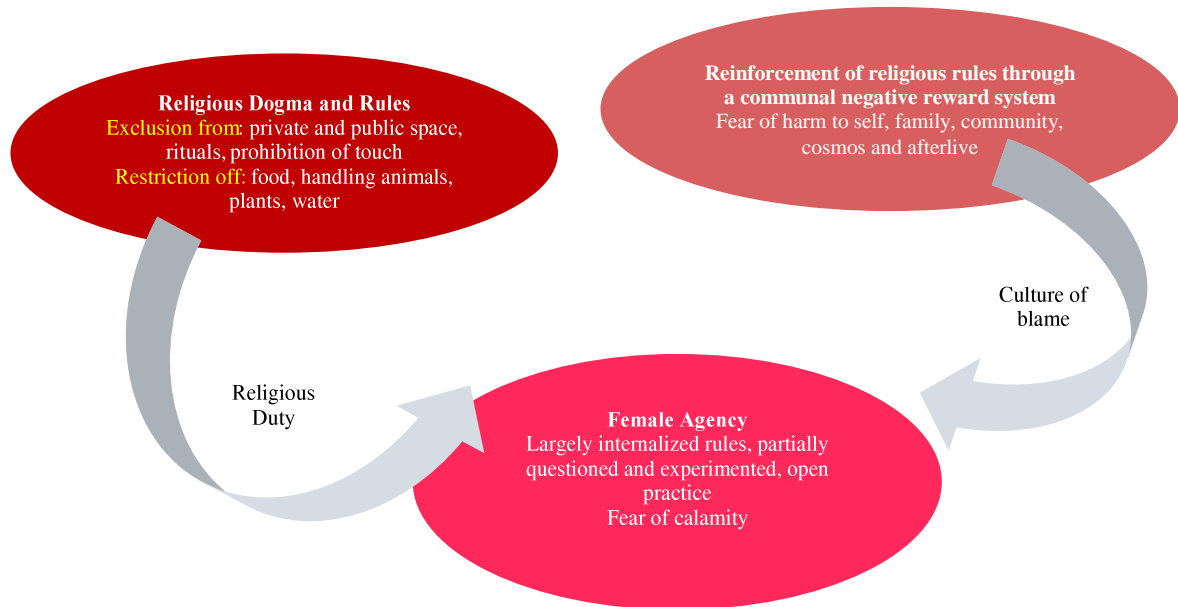
Only a handful of women said that at a young age, they were curious and empirically tested the rules to see what would happen when they did not observe restrictions. Testing the negative reward system was limited to touching forbidden plants. The surprise that nothing terrible happened to the plant or oneself did not result in further

experimental rule testing. Female rule compliance lies in the conceptually loose connection between cause and effect, the possibility of delayed divine punishment, and the enormous scale of possible divine punishment. The latter was illustrated by one participant who linked the 2015 earthquake in Nepal to the modern lifestyle of women in Kathmandu who would even enter the Pashupati temple while menstruating. Another participant linked natural disasters in Sindhupalchowk to the fact that women of the local Tamang community living within the realm of the gods would not observe strict menstrual seclusion. In Achham, we spoke to an elderly Dalit woman who reasoned that the anti-Chaupadi movement and the lack of rule compliance in girls at their parental home resulted in a more frequent appearance of wild animals in the village and a recent hail storm:

*“for the past few years we have been experiencing calamity after calamity. Last year we had poor farming, we experienced hail storms which we had never seen here and all kinds of wild animals like snakes and tigers were coming to the village. All because nowadays, younger women are not observing menstrual exclusion strictly. As a result, we decided to do a purification puja this year and ask for forgiveness from our village deity”*  
(Female, housewife, 65, married, Dalit, Achham).

Upon encountering mishaps, women will habitually search their memory to remember incidents where they did not conform. When in doubt, many women visit religious leaders (*dhami*) to seek mediation and the source of the mishap. Mediation to appease angered deities or dissatisfied ancestors may include intensified worship but may lie in the prescribed reinforcement of rules, including the strict observance of menstrual exclusion. Since informants believed in the negative reward system, fear, and guilt result in rule conformity. Visiting a village in Achham, I observed two women whose paths crossed. The older woman inquired from a distance which day of the menstrual cycle the younger woman was presently observing. Upon establishing a potential source of pollution, the younger woman gave way to the older who claimed she would most certainly get possessed by a deity if she were to be touched by a menstruating woman. The younger woman stood aside patiently to let both the older woman and her cow pass at a distance.

A blame culture upholds the dharmic understanding of menstruation where calamities reinforce rule compliance. Every sign of not following menstrual restrictions can tarnish a woman's image within society, isolating her socially as one who cannot be trusted. As shown, the loose connection between cause and effect limits the willingness to empirical experimentation.



**Fig: 6.1** Menstrual Practices within Religious system: “*Stridharma*” Duty and Fear of divine wrath

## 6.2 Menstruating during the Maoist Period: Fear of Violence

During the decade of the civil war, 1996-2006 women in Maoist-controlled areas were forced to abandon the menstrual exclusionary practices. However, temporary presence of Maoist cadres in villages forced women to navigate between two mutually exclusive ideologies- first of Hinduism which relied on the fear of divine powers, while the second, revolutionary Maoism, relied on imminent violence.

During the civil war, Maoist activists established a parallel government in villages, including our field sites. Maoists organised makeshift tax collection while holding alternative court hearings to solve disputes. Maoist courts were concerned with caste discrimination and gender-based violence targeting politicians, government officials, and religious authorities. In both Jumla and Achham, resident religious healers (dhami) were forced by Maoist cadres to renounce their faith. As a Dhami from Achham remembers:

*“ They put guns to my head and beat me up. But I could not deny the existence of God. Why would I lie? (Male, 67, Thakuri, Dhami, Achham).*

Several participants in Jumla narrated that the Maoist activists had destroyed and looted their temple, however these narratives are accompanied with narration of divine justice where those individual were punished by divine power.

*“The one who beat the drum got killed. It was the “Pili incident,” and some others died during the attack in Rara camp in the month of Poush” (Female, 54, Thakuri, Housewife, Jumala)*

The same force extended to menstrual practices as well, where during the temporary visit armed Maoist would force the menstruating women to enter the house,

*“If they (the Maoists) saw someone staying outside, they would know that it is due to menstruation and they forcefully made us enter the house”. (Female, 54, Thakuri, Housewife, Jumala)*

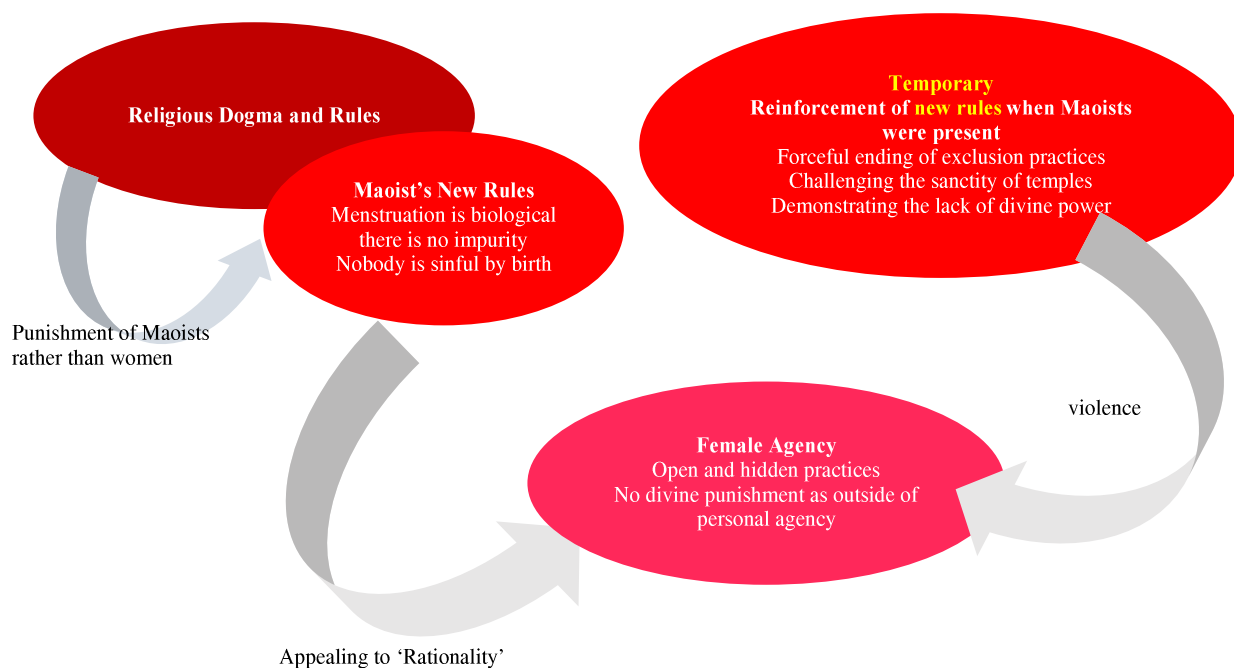
Thakuri women from Dailekh also narrate the similar stories,

*“When they visited the village, we hid from them. They said that we should not stay in the goth and when they went away, we returned and used the goth freely. We we had to worship our deity”. (Female, 45, Thakuri, Housewife, Dailekh)*

The same women explains that not only the menstrual practices but they also practiced their religion covertly. When hiding was not possible, menstruating women reluctantly entered their houses during menstruation. However, one of the women participants explains that since it was done under the coercion of Maoist, women did not experience any divine wrath instead deity allegedly punished those Maoist cadre who forced menstruating women to disobey the menstrual practices.

*“As a result, God did punish them - not the women, they were just helpless.” ((Female, 54, Thakuri, Housewife, Jumala)*

Since, in the interviews women were reflecting, two key points emerge from the narrative. Firstly, in the presence of imminent violence they did abandon the overt practices but subverted them through covert practices wherever possible. Secondly, despite physical and symbolic violence against religious authorities and symbols they continued to believe in dharmic system and in hindsight interpreted the various events of conflict period in the village as the divine intervention and justice of their village deity.



**Fig: 6.2** Menstruating during the Maoist Period: Fear of Violence

### 6.3 Menstruating in a Secular State: From fear to Shame

The decade-long Maoist conflict ended with the second people's movement, the abolition of the monarchy, and the declaration of a secular, inclusive, democratic republic in 2008. The new socio-political order renewed the efforts of government and NGOs to transform the exclusionary menstrual practices in accordance to new order. This was reflected in the legislation as well where in 2005 the supreme court of Nepal declared extreme menstrual exclusion (such as the banishment to *chhaugoths*) to be a "harmful tradition" and *chhaupadi* illegal only. But under new regime only, in 2018 Nepal categorise the enforcement of *chhaupadi* practice a criminal offense punishable by three months of imprisonment and/or a 3000 Rs fine. In 2019 the Nepal police made its first arrest under the new law. The brother-in-law of a woman who died from smoke inhalation in the confined space of a "*chhaugoth*" was arrested in Achham for banishing his sister-in-law to a *chhaugoth* (Ghimire, 2019).

This was also complemented with NGOs initiative which viewed the extreme menstrual practices from the lens of "women rights" and WASH perspective. This has resulted in several awareness-raising training, community dialogue, radio programs, and workshops in Dailekh, Achham and Jumla as well. However, the discourses of

religious purity, biological processes, law and justice, and communal peer pressure are irreconcilable. As one young participant explained, despite understanding the biology behind menstruation, unfortunate events continue to be interpreted as a cosmic imbalance that needs to be addressed with traditional practice, even when the sad event escapes empirical observation. The young Dalit woman from Achham said:

*“All these older women will go to NGOs workshops wearing saris and will agree with the facilitator that menstruation is a natural process and promise that they won't practice chhaugoth in their homes. But when they come back, they won't let us stay inside the house. They will claim that there is a recent increase in snakes and wild animals appearing in the village. It is completely false. I have not seen any such increase” (Female, SLC passed, 20, unmarried, Dalit, Achham).*

While the young woman interprets the rule enforcement at her home as an introduction of double standards, a 28-year-old Chhetri, the In charge of a health post, offered a different explanation for a continuous tradition that defies rational engagement. He agrees that besides knowledge of the biological process of menstruation, exclusionary practices continue due to communal peer pressure stating:

*“ You see, it is not me who will decide. I live in a community where everyone practices it and only our family abandons it? It will not be possible.” (Male, 28, married, Chhetri, Health post-in-charge, Achham)*

While the argument of peer pressure seems convincing, it is but one element within a complex puzzle of interlaced factors. A 38-year-old Chhetri woman from Achham made this point clear when she narrated her experience with peer pressure. As an NGO worker she had been expected to lead by example:

*“ I was working in the NGO on the Chhaupadi issue. And they did not like it when local staff working in the community themselves practice chhaupadi at their house. With this knowledge and moral pressure, I stopped practicing it”. (Female, 38, 28, married, Chhetri, NGO staff, Achham)*

However, upon experiencing a period of ill health and when failing to find a cure, the NGO worker reverted to observe menstrual exclusion. She shared that this return to tradition improved her health:

*“But then I started getting sick, my monthly cycle got irregular, and I was bleeding heavily. My family spent a considerable amount of money on my treatment, but nothing happened. And then, out of fear, I restarted observing chhaupadi. And after that, my health improved.” (Female, NGO staff, 38, married, Chhetri, Achham)*

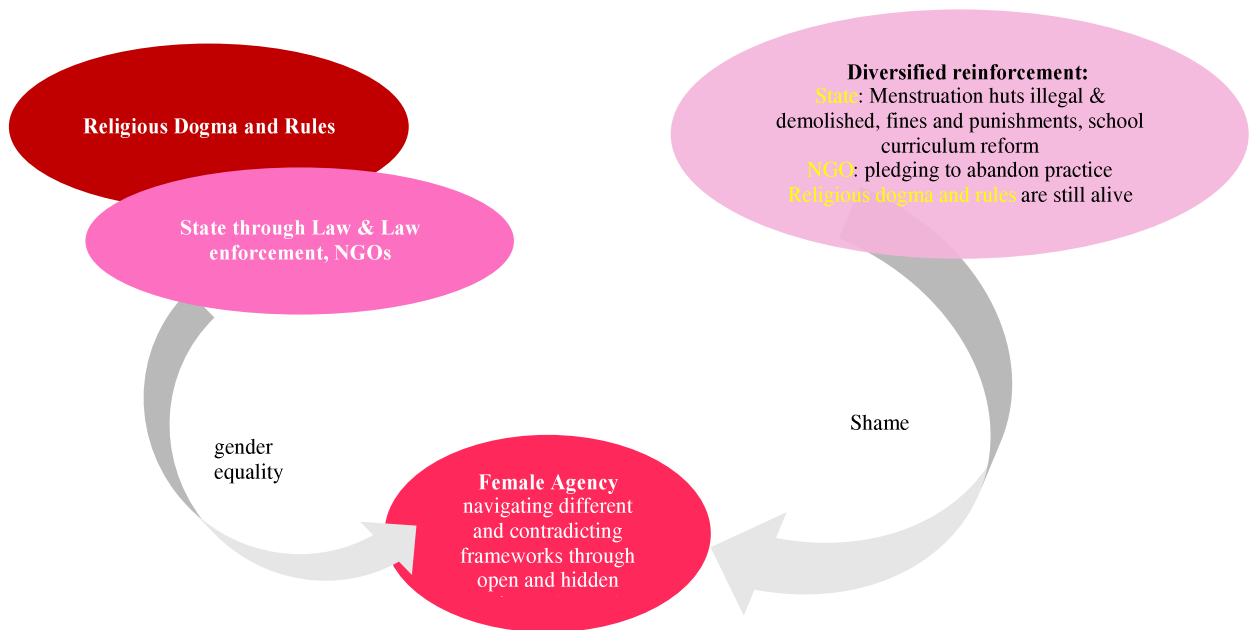
Conflicting and co-existing ideologies lead to fear and anger amongst women in Dailekh, Achham, and Jumla. In Dailekh, while attending a religious event, *Khadratri* that lasted throughout the night, several women inquired about the research and expressed their anger over being confronted with yet another group of young NGO women “convincing” local women to enter their homes during menstruation citing the practice superstitious. I experienced similar anger while in Dailekh. One day while having tea in a village, I heard a woman shouting in a local language and occasionally turning toward my direction. When I asked the tea shop owner to translate, I learned that the woman was angry thinking yet another NGO group had arrived to force menstruating women to enter their homes. The tea shop owner further translated that the woman demanded the NGO should pay her 60,000 NRs and then only she would happily build a separate house instead of a *Chhaugoth* to stay in it.

What appeared to be a consensus amongst women in Dailekh, Jumla, and Achham was the discomfort they felt towards anyone who tried to take decisions over menstruation out of their hands. One of the participants, who was also a women's health volunteer, was particularly angry with an NGO that used peer pressure as a method:

*“the NGO asked us to take an oath that we will not go far, we will not send girls to the ‘goth’. They asked us to take an oath and even made us put our hand on our chest (heart) [uncomfortable laughter]. All the women from all nine wards were invited. It was almost 30-35 women. Everyone came and took the oath to not practice Chhaupadi at their home”. (Female, Women health volunteer, 48, Chhetri, Achham)*

NGOs have provided rational explanations explaining the biology of menstruation. Still, they have failed to work with a cosmology in which observable calamities reinforce the belief in the efficacy of menstrual exclusion. Women in the far western hills perceive interfering with traditional practices as patronising interference. It

should not surprise that women in the far west object to further limitation of their already limited agency.



**Fig: 6.3** Menstruating in a Secular State: From fear to Shame

### 6.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, the field data from west Nepal suggests that temporary intervention does not result in a lasting paradigm shift where menstrual exclusion is concerned. Women in Jumla, Dailekh, and Achham were exposed to a set of mutually exclusive rules over the past decades. Navigating practice amidst overlapping yet conflicting ideologies and programs has become increasingly complicated.

For women who believe in Hinduism, abandoning the tradition of menstrual exclusion is not a viable option. The realm and the power of local deities and the authority of religious leaders were not questioned by women during the Maoist intervention, nor have public health interventions changed their understanding of sacred landscapes and the concept of ritual pollution. The study shows that women perceive suggested changes to their traditional menstrual practice as a dangerous interference to their attempts of keeping themselves and their families safe and healthy. The study shows that the superficial interventions that instill fear and shame to produce behavior change are ineffective. Destroying *chaugoths*, forcing women to enter their homes, or making women pledge to end traditional practices are short-term interventions that

will not have a lasting effect beyond transforming overt practices into covert practices. Menstrual practices in these communities are inter-linked with wider system of religious purity, well-being individual women, families as well as communities and wider cosmic balance. Hence, demystifying, and de-linking the interwind belief system of purity and cosmic balance is needed to alter the harmful menstrual practices over time.

## CHAPTER VII

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this chapter I present summary and conclusion of the study. The chapter consist of two sections. The first section summarized the major findings and present the methodological reflection. The second section present the conclusion of the study in three major theme- cultural practices and its continuation; Changes in the cultural practices and women agency. This section also includes the critical methodological reflection.

#### 8.1 Summary

##### **Menstrual practices and underlying structures upholding the practices:**

Menstruation is the indication that women body is fertile and capable of carrying child which is one of the essential biological processes that ensure the continuation of the human species. However, menstrual practices had been culturally framed and in Hindu community of South Asia menstruation is associated with ritual impurity. The Hindu religious text like *Manusmriti*, *Swasthanni Barta katha*, *Stridharmapaddhati* are few of the text which links biological process of menstruation to one of the biggest crimes in Hinduism “*Brahma hatya*” and hence the menstruating bodies are the sinful status or ritually impure bodies. However, in compare to the prescribed menstrual practices in old Hindu text, the contemporary menstrual practices show variation based on clan, caste, marital status, and age of the menstruator. Menstrual practices also vary across the geographical location. It is also found that the local priest and religious leader/ traditional healers are the main authority that links the menstruation to the ritual impurity, and the continuation of menstrual exclusion depends on the elaborate belief system of divine justice/ punishment which is believed by individual and community, and upheld by the religious leaders/ traditional healers. Many of the interventions fails to recognized this and only focus on behavioral aspect of menstruation or challenge the issue from social justice perspective, however until and unless we recognize the nature of the practice as of ritual impurity, its primary authority and its belief system that upheld the practice, any intervention will fail to bring any substantial change.

**Changes in menstrual practices:**

Many scholars present the menstrual practices which is associated with religion as rigid practices and present women including community from victim-perpetrator dichotomy with no agency or power to negotiate or changes. It also presents religious practices independent of any socio-economic changes. However, this study has shown that changing socio-economic context like migration, changing family structure, increasing discourse of women rights, limited labor force etc has created tensions within the social fabric and need of adaptation has risen. This has resulted in adjustment as well as introduction of new strategies and re-negotiation or change of menstrual practices within families, communities and even with religious authorities including God. The study identifies three main factors for change: First is education, which not only include schools but also range of other institutions or learning that can shift in the way communities observe menstrual practices. This includes introduction of new religion, religious text and learning from other communities and adopting their menstrual practices. Second is migration, with migration either the migrants bring new product and knowledge back to the home communities which shift the practices or either challenge or weaken the existing knowledge around menstruation which present menstruating women impure and can bring divine wrath. Another change in menstrual practice is experience by migrant when they are living in host communities, where they have abandoned or altered the exclusionary menstrual practices to minimum. Here I identify number of rational used by migrant for alteration in menstrual practices, they are – outside the realm of God, absence of reinforcing social structure, Practice no longer socially accepted, Logistically not feasible to practice it, and Conflicts with wifely duty. I also present cases that shows that Hindu religion which is presented as rigid social structure has space for negotiation where communities have long tradition of negotiation with deity to alter the practices as well. Third factor of change is external intervention, this can be the government and non-government intervention in the community which either directly address the menstrual practices or other intervention like building toilets, health related intervention or even intervention by introducing laws, which results in the menstrual practices like shape and structure of menstrual huts, communal/ individual huts, practicing menstrual exclusion covertly or overtly.

### **How changes in political regime have influenced menstrual practices?**

In last three decades Nepal has experienced a drastic socio-political shift from Hindu monarchy state to secular republic via a violent decade-long Maoist conflict (Jha 2014). These shifts provided three different socio-political paradigms/ regime, which differ in their views on women and menstrual practices. The study inquired women of different age group about their menstrual practices under different regime. The data suggests that temporary intervention does not result in a lasting paradigm shift where menstrual exclusion is concerned. For women who believes in patriarchal Hinduism, abandoning the tradition of menstrual exclusion does not appear to be viable options. The realm and the power of local deities, the authority of religious leaders were not questioned by women during the Maoist intervention, nor have public health interventions changed their understanding of sacred landscapes and the concept of ritual pollution. The study shows that women perceive suggested changes to their traditional menstrual practice as a dangerous interference to their attempts of keeping themselves and their families safe and healthy. The study shows that the superficial interventions that instill fear and shame to produce behavior change are ineffective. Destroying *chaugoths*, forcing women to enter their homes, or making women pledge to end traditional practices are short-term interventions that will not have a lasting effect beyond transforming overt practices into covert practices. Menstrual practices in these communities are inter-linked with wider system of religious purity, well-being individual women, families as well as communities and wider cosmic balance. Hence, demystifying, and de-linking the interwind belief system of purity and cosmic balance is needed to alter the harmful menstrual practices over time.

### **Methodological reflection**

In research, the “subject” and the “context” of the research is considered the primary area of interest whereas challenges (ethical dilemma as well as emotional toll) faced by the researcher while doing research are either considered trivial or remain unspoken and unexplored. However, in qualitative research, the researcher’s positionality; her ontological belief; her ethical and moral compass as well as her ability for critical reflection including reflexivity, plays a crucial role in the quality of qualitative data being collected and the way she analysed the data. During my research as menstruator, feminist and practicing Hindu, has shaped my experience as

a researcher as well as the way I see my participants and the way I analyzed the data. As a feminist, practicing Hindu and as a researcher on menstrual practices, my ethics of being was continuously challenged in the field- should I disclose my menstrual status? as it is very meaningful the community I am working with, as a feminist should I outwardly challenge the practice or as a guest of the community should I abide by the local practice and norms. These ethical dilemmas were constantly in my mind, and with short stay in each site I chose not to disclose my menstrual status but for long stay this can be a major ethical dilemma for feminist, practicing Hindu and a researcher, with the concern for the security of the researcher itself and her feminist stand. Another important issue is the psychological well-being of the researcher. During the field visit I was continuously interviewing Priest, *Dhami*, religious leaders, men, and women who claim to either get possessed or sharing the narrative of divine punishment and wrath. During the field visit, these experiences did lead to stress and fear in me. However, these emotions allowed me to empathize with the women and community who are living under the belief of such divine punishment and instead of critiquing the practice through feminist lens, my analysis was heavily influence by the goal to understand the practice and finding meaning behind its continuation and its change. Other experience as menstruator, like finding menstrual product in the field, disposing menstrual product also allowed me to understand the menstruation not only as a biological and private process but a social process where your menstrual status and your menstrual used product are under the constant scrutiny of the community. Another reflection is related to the ontological shift a researcher can have after the research experience. Before entering the field, I viewed menstruation as a biological process, however the exposure to the field where menstruation was not only biological process but strongly linked to the ritual purity and divine system of justice and punishment. And a for a brief period, it forced me to question my own ontology on how I should perceive menstruation and as a feminist I decided that even if I I don't have any biological or religious argument to challenge the "impure" status of menstruating bodies, as a feminist I won't accept it and hence came to conclusion that many time ontology can be the political choice for an individual as well.

## 8.2 Conclusion

The first conclusion of the study is that, the underlying structure and knowledge upholding the exclusionary menstrual practices is the religious belief that present the origin of menstruation to a sin and menstruating bodies as a ritually impure body. This belief is upheld by the elaborate system of divine punishment and wrath, where Hindu priest and religious healers / leaders like *Dhami* act as an interpreter who interpret any misgivings to the individual, family, or the community to the lapses in the menstrual practices.

The second conclusion of the study is that, even though religious practices especially associated to global south is presented as rigid structure and practices but with socio-economic changes like migration, education and other external intervention from other actors can bring the change around menstrual practices.

The Third conclusion of the study is that, without demystifying and de-linking the interwind belief system of purity and cosmic balance, women agency cannot be expanded simply by force or by shame.

The fourth conclusion of the study is related to methodological reflection. The study concludes that while researching on sensitive issues especially for the insider (researcher) where her gender is deeply interwind with the very essence of the research, the researcher's positionality; her ontological belief; her ethical and moral compass as well as her ability for critical reflection including reflexivity, plays a crucial role in the quality of qualitative data being collected and the way she analysed the data. And many times, lead to ontological shift in the researcher as well.

## **Annex I-Check-List for In-depth Interview with Female of 18 years and above**

1. Background Information of the Study Participants
  - Age
  - Sex
  - Marital status
  - Caste/ethnicity
  - Education
  - Occupation
  
2. Issues Related to History of Menstruation
  - I would like to know your life histories starting from questions like where did you born. When did you born?
  - How many brothers and sisters do you have?
  - Did they go school or not?
  - What they are doing now?
  - When did you get marry?
  - How many children do you have?
  - What are you doing now?
  
3. Stigma and Discrimination
  - Where do women and girls live during menstruation? Where did you live in your first menstruation? For how many days? What was told to you on your first menstruation? What did you do?
  - Are there any menstrual exclusion practices in this village? If yes, please share such practices?
  - Where do they live during menstruation? Do they have to live in cowshed? If yes, how many days do they live in cowshed or Chhaupadi shed?
  - Why they have to live in cowshed or separate Chhaupadi Shed (Chhuikatero)?
  - What obligations they have to follow during menstruation? What they can / and cannot eat and what kinds of work they can do? What kinds of works are not allowed to do?
  - What are other restrictions assigned to them by family and society?

- What happen if they have not followed the assigned restrictions?
  - If they have touched disallowed things by mistake then what do they do?
  - If women touched disallowed things intentionally then what happen to them?
  - If they have touched men, children, living plant, fruit bearing trees, cattle, home, spring, and temple etc then what happen to them?
  - If they touched religious leaders such as Dhami, and Jaisi by intentionally then what happen to them and to the whole community? Why milk products are prohibited for women and up to how many days of menstrual cycle they cannot eat?
  - If local religious leaders (such as Dhamis, Jaisis, Phulpates) walk nearby menstruated women then what happens?
  - What are the bad happening in the families due to menstruation / Chhaupadi negligence?
  - What opinion do religious leaders have with regards to menstruation practice?
  - How do (women) they spend nights in cowshed during winter, summer, and monsoon? What do they face in winter, summer, and monsoon? What local politicians, teachers, and NGO activists say about Chhau system?
4. Change and continuity
- Have you seen / experienced any change in menstruation exclusion practices compared to past? If yes, what are those changes? What are sources of such changes? Who have played key roles?
  - Have you seen / experienced any continuation of menstrual exclusion practices? If yes, what are those continuations? What are the key sources for such continuation? Who have played key roles?

## **Annex II- Check-List for In-depth Interview with Key Informant**

**(Note: If the participant is male, he will be asked about menstrual practice in his family)**

### **1. Background Information of the Study Participants**

- Age
- Sex
- Marital status
- Caste/ethnicity
- Education
- Occupation

### **2. Issues Related to personal History**

- I would like to know your life histories starting from questions like where did you born. When did you born?
- How many brothers and sisters do you have?
- Did they go school or not?
- What they are doing now?
- When did you get marry?
- How many children do you have?
- What are you doing now?

### **3. Stigma and Discrimination**

- Where do women and girls live during menstruation? Where did you live in your first menstruation? For how many days? What was told to you on your first menstruation? What did you do?
- Are there any menstrual exclusion practices in this village? If yes, please share such practices?
- Where do they live during menstruation? Do they have to live in cowshed? If yes, how many days do they live in cowshed or Chhaupadi shed?
- Why they have to live in cowshed or separate Chhaupadi Shed (Chhuikatero)?
- What obligations they have to follow during menstruation? What they can / and cannot eat and what kinds of work they can do? What kinds of works are not allowed to do?

- What are other restrictions assigned to them by family and society?
- What happen if they have not followed the assigned restrictions?
- If they have touched disallowed things by mistake then what do they do?
- If women touched disallowed things intentionally then what happen to them?
- If they have touched men, children, living plant, fruit bearing trees, cattle, home, spring, and temple etc then what happen to them?
- If they touched religious leaders such as Dhami, and Jaisi by intentionally then what happen to them and to the whole community? Why milk products are prohibited for women and up to how many days of menstrual cycle they cannot eat?
- If local religious leaders (such as Dhamis, Jaisis, Phulpates) walk nearby menstruated women then what happens?
- What are the bad happening in the families due to menstruation / Chhaupadi negligence?
- What opinion do religious leaders have with regards to menstruation practice?
- How do (women) they spend nights in cowshed during winter, summer, and monsoon? What do they face in winter, summer, and monsoon? What local politicians, teachers, and NGO activists say about Chhau system?

#### **4. Change and continuity**

- Have you seen / experienced any change in menstruation exclusion practices compared to past? If yes, what are those changes? What are sources of such changes? Who have played key roles?
- Have you seen / experienced any continuation of menstrual exclusion practices? If yes, what are those continuations? What are the key sources for such continuation? Who have played key roles?

### **Annex III- Check-List for Focus Group Discussion with Women Group**

1. Background Information of the Study Participants
2. General experience of menstruation
3. Socio-cultural Practices
4. Continuity and Change

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