Laal Daag

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Abstract

Indian women, in the roles they adopt, are vital to the family. Yet rural India continues to shame women, and this reality is shown most prominently during menstruation. The narrative piece *Laal Daag* showcases how female menstruation has been interpreted in the light of the following myth: women bleed to mitigate God Indra's guilt for slaying a sacred creature. Furthermore, the patriarchal society and lack of knowledge prevent a true understanding of this biological process.

Girls and women consequently experience a downward trajectory in many aspects of their life: 1) absenteeism in schools partly from unsatisfactory toilet facilities, which contributes to stunting of their academic performance; 2) contraction of Reproductive Tract Infections from using unsanitary cloths as pads; and 3) psychological morbidity due to social stigma. Addressing this issue is imperative to attaining the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

Government stakeholders must fund and facilitate collaboration between community health workers and leaders. Women and girls' opinions must be solicited to create adequate toilet facilities, while safe incinerators and affordable locally-crafted pads must be made available. Education on reproductive health is needed and should be discussed in formal (school) and informal settings (home) by all—including boys and men. With this, rural India may progress while celebrating womanhood.

Laal Daag

She espouses the colour *laal*, or red, in a magnitude of different ways. It is the symbol of her future marriage which she will learn to honour daily by applying *sindoor*, or vermillion over her head. She adorns herself carefully by wrapping eight meters of red fabric which she calls a *saree* before setting foot into temple to offer her prayers. This same colour which she honours strips her of her rights ever so easily, leaving her to hide the red stain marking her womanhood every month. Indian woman primarily living in remote locations are not permitted to stay in their home during their menstruation cycle. They must not sleep next to their husband and are prohibited from practicing their faith. They are deemed 'impure' by society and are treated like livestock until the 'curse' has left their body (1-3). An ancient Vedic tale narrates that women bleed every month because of God Indra's wrongdoing in slaying Vritras. As a result, the blood shed during a woman's menstrual cycle is the representation of the guilt that accompanies this act (1). From there, the patriarchal framework of rural Indian society has only heightened the perception which dictates that women should be seen as secondary. Yet again, the "Man" has the power and she is given the utmost difficult task to desensitize the stigma and oppression that undermine her humanity (4). She has not asked for this.

Parvati's name has been given to her in honour of the Hindu Goddess of fertility and strength, in the hope that one day she would blossom into a mother. During her walk home from school

she thinks about the day she'll be happily wed and ponders what motherhood will bring. She then giggled in disbelief that she forgot to factor in that she must at least complete her college degree before taking marital vows. As Parvati is a few kilometers from her village, she overhears footsteps approaching.

"Eh filthy *Churel*! Didn't your mother teach you to stay home when you are 'cursed'?!" Parvati quickens her pace. She recognizes the voice and that horrid word for "witch." It was Dilip's voice. Soon the rest of his goons would be summoned and she'd be left to fend them off by herself. She observes Dilip staring at the bottom half of her body. She takes a swift glance at the back of her uniform and finds the culprit that gave her away. Parvati vulnerably bolts off to the side road that would lead to the back entrance of her modest home. She could hear him laughing from afar…"

As she unlocks the back door, Parvati's father greets his daughter and from her panting, he pours water in a grey metallic cup. Knowing that he would hand it to her, Parvati quickly distances herself, slips out of the room and into her own (1). She locks the doors. She then peels off her white uniform that was stuck to her with sweat. There was that familiar *laal*—mocking her this time. Although a new "victim" to this burden, Parvati knew her place for the next several days. "Maa told me I cannot enter our kitchen. I cannot touch my father and brothers. I must sleep in the shed until I no longer bleed, this will keep my family safe," she told herself in consolation (5). She knew that she wouldn't be able to write her mathematics test at school. She would be absent and once returned, Jilal Sir would not question where she was nor would he offer her remedial sessions (6). How could she attend her classes? The school latrine was a dirt hole with two bricks placed on either side. Without running water and the assurance that no one would peek around the three-walled arrangement, she wouldn't dare risk it (5). She remembers how Lali had tried to do so in the woods, only to find members of the younger class watching her. It wasn't worth being embarrassed like Lali, she decided. Parvati also considered that she couldn't wash her used cloth, which served as her pad, nor could she get rid of it. Not to mention that the waste disposal system was inexistent (5). Finding no solution, she leaves aside her bleak thoughts. She knew she could not bathe but nevertheless, Parvati grabs a ragged cloth and change of clothes and heads to the furthest pond to bathe and rinse off her *laal daag*, or stain, far from anyone's sight (1). She wondered how other girls living elsewhere coped with this spell and why it happened to only girls. No one knowledgeable spoke about it and her school friends did not have much insight (7, 8). She wished the closest hospital would not be so far; she could have visited the doctor on her own (1)...

At nightfall, she returns home and gathers her things for the cold night in the mud shed (9). Parvati enters the stale room. Her father follows her shortly with the spare cutlery they owned, a box of matches, spare candles and the covered platter that contained her dinner. He followed the protocol by leaving it all at the doorstep. He

stood there silent for a moment. "Shamoli Kaki came by for a cup of *chai*. We didn't expect her, but she had asked where you were. I thought you should know." Before Parvati could say anything, she watched his hesitant shadow disappear. She knew Dilip's grandmother patrolled the village and made sure the rules were followed (5). Although her own family had good intentions, no one would oppose against fixed norms. She ignored this and closed the door to eat her meal in silence.

Sitting on her bed, she lifted the cover to her dinner. There was the usual *aloo baja, daal,* and rice. Knowing Parvati liked spice, her mother had added a *laal* chili. The red streak across the plate filled her vision. That red which she had trusted so much – the red of marriage, a bright future, and joy – now was treacherous. Now was the red of shame. A shame which would never leave her, every month falling from her body … Slowly, she covered the plate and set her dinner aside. She leaned over and blew out the candle: the red couldn't haunt her in the dark. She lay down on her bed, and black covered red.

* * *

The monsoon season welcomed the village and nourished its crops. With the endless rain showering over, the rivers were now filled and prospered with fish. Every monsoon marked the coming of a local tradition: to fish as a community and compete against the neighbouring villagers. Parvati's family went to the river Sunday afternoon, just like all other families. Parvati was particularly excited; she preplanned to purchase handmade *kulfi* with her allowance. As she walked to the river, she thought about the treat's cold texture on her tongue and how some of it will inevitable melt and drip away. Once arrived, she immediately called out to her family that she was going to the *kulfi* stand. The line was already fairly long, but Parvati was prepared to be patient.

Suddenly, a hand from behind gently tapped her shoulder. Parvati did not respond, she was fourth in line now and could not lose sight of what she wanted. When her turn came—before Parvati could speak to the vendor—the same young woman behind her interjected and purchased several *kulfis*—one for each of the children in line. A boy Parvati failed to recognize immediately exclaimed to the woman, "Didi! Sister! You are so kind! Please stay a little while longer in our village."

The young woman was dressed in a multicoloured cotton saree. The border of her maroon petticoat was visible and her flowery blouse complemented her warm smile. "Ranu, I will visit soon, but another didi will tend to your village. I have some work at Babu Ghat." The woman then called the children to take harbor under the shade from the trees. Parvati was compelled to follow; her village's name echoed in her ears.

They sat around in a circle. Parvati looked perplexed, so a younger girl sitting next to her described the woman as a "*Kaa-meee-o-ni-tee Warh-ker*". Parvaati noticed the girl was still growing most of her teeth. The woman wearing the coloured saree overheard and said "It is

Community Worker, I am an Accredited Social Health Activist or ASHA worker. My name is Meghla (5). *Baccho*—Kids, let us talk about our health. Tell me what things matter to you." My parents! My muscles said the boys! My teeth! When a teenage girl said, "my womanhood," most of the boys made silly faces. – "Which includes menstruation," finished off the ASHA woman (10). Ranu, the boy who spoke earlier nodded. "I want to be like the Padman – Arunachalam Muruganantham—and create local sanitary pads for all!" he interjected (10). "Yes, Ranu. Local pads made carefully are economic and will create jobs for mothers," said Meghla (3, 10).

Parvati did not notice her *kulfi* melting away, she was mesmerized by the moment. Some boys left the circle, but that didn't bother her.

Meghla explained that she has been working with other community health workers and community leaders to ensure that better resources were made available for women and girls, as well as ensure that mothers are knowledgeable about reproductive health (3, 10-12). The children who already knew Meghla took turns telling how reproductive health was openly discussed at school now, and that their teachers—male and female—spoke about it; although most girls preferred when Rupa Madam fostered discussion (10). The topic was even gradually being spoken at home, when the ASHA worker visited (3, 12). They also described how vending machines dispensing sanitary napkins will soon be installed in the schools and that incinerators would get rid of the used ones (10). Meghla added that toilet facilities will also undergo a positive change (11). As the group chatted off comfortably about such community taboos, the day slowly came to an end (3, 10-12).

On her walk back home, Parvati noticed the bright red sunset glaring throughout the sky. Her gaze was fixed, but she did not hesitate. She enjoyed how the warm colours blended into the darkness. "Tomorrow's monsoon rain will surely bring another rainbow!" she said aloud. Parvati hummed and skipped the rest of the way home, for life was colourful.

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