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Overnight Adulthood: The Story of my *Thirandu Kalyanam*

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Summary: *The article narrates the author's menarche experience and the traditional ritual, thirandu kalyanam, in Kerala. It reflects on the cultural practices, taboos, and discriminations encountered by menstruating women.*

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It was a night like any other, with everyone in the household asleep. But in an instant, everything shifted with a single drop of blood. Advice started pouring in from all directions, "Yesterday, you were a girl. Today, you've become a woman. Wear clothes that cover you well, speak softly, and walk with your head down. You are not a kid anymore." I was still a girl, clueless and forced to act like an adult. This is the story of my menarche.

Menarche is the first menstrual period in a female adolescent. In the past, when a girl attained puberty, a ceremony called *Vayass-ariyikkal* or *Thirandu Kalyanam* (age-indicating puberty marriage) was generally performed in Kerala. Popularly known as *kunjikalyanam* among the Nair community, it lasts four days during which the girl is kept or quarantined in a separate room following pollution rules. The girl who had her period is said to be *thirandu*, which means polluted. While this practice is not as widespread today, some families still choose to commemorate the onset of menstruation in this manner. I was one of the few people in my friends group who underwent a thirandu kalyanam.

Growing up in a joint family, the moment I experienced my first period, I found myself surrounded by all the women in the household, each offering advice and instructions. It was overwhelming, to say the least. Just the day before, I had been shielded from this flood of information, and now I was expected to take it all in at once. Looking back, I realise how unprepared I was for such an

important aspect of my life.

No wonder Kamala Das, when she had her first period, said, "I am ill, I am dying... Something has broken inside me and I am bleeding."¹

Thirandu Kalyanam Ritual

I was ten years old when I learned about menarche and thirandu kalyanam for the first time from the Malayalam movie *Pavithram* (1994). In the film, the heroine experiences her first period, and her brother explains to one of her male friends how she is now becoming a grown woman and mentions the phrase, "Blood on the moon." The girl in the movie is advised not to go outside for four days and not even see the sky. When I had my period, this was what came to my mind.



Figure 1. Thirandu Kalyanam. Image: JANAL Archives, 2024

My thirandu kalyanam started with a *kurava* (an ululating sound) to alert the neighbourhood women about my period. I was then bathed and made to sit on a thick woollen blanket called *karimpadam* covered with a white cloth called *vella*. I was given a *valkannadi* (hand mirror used for rituals) which I

¹ Das, Kamala. *My Story*. India: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009.

would hold for the next four days. I didn't understand it at first when my aunt said to me, “*Ellam kazhinju ini ninakk ulsavom thullalum onnum illa*” (Everything's over. Now there's neither festival nor dance for you). During menarche, women are not allowed to touch or see anyone, especially men. I wasn't even allowed to drink water from the same bottle, share food with the others, or go near the kitchen.

Savithri *muthassi* (grandmother), my neighbour, recalled from her memory, her thirandu kalyanam. There was a piece of iron kept under her karimpadam which was said to keep her away from “harmful thoughts and energies”. My aunt shared a different story about her mother's first period. She had been moved to a menstrual room called *valaimapura*, away from the house. Along with the *valkannadi*, women were given a small penknife to protect themselves as they would be alone in a room.

The taboo period ends on the fourth day, after a bath called *masakuli* and a ritual called *tullirukkuthal*. The bathing ceremony is usually conducted in a nearby pond or river. But mine was conducted in a bathroom. *Tullirukkuthal* is done by extracting liquid from turmeric and other herbs and applying this paste onto the “polluted” girl. This liquid is said to have purifying properties that terminate the pollution.

I was bathed by all the women in my house and was given new clothes to wear. I was dressed up like a bride and wore gold jewellery and jasmine flowers. With a veil covering my head, I sat in the living room, the centre of all

activity in the house, with a lighted *nilavilakku* (lamp), *idangazhi nellu* (measuring vessel associated with the *nellu*-paddy system in Kerala. One *idangazhi* is around 800 grams) and *ashta mangalyam* (a group of eight auspicious things believed to bring good luck) in front of me. Everybody started giving me gifts—from gold to dresses and sweets. The ritual ended with a feast for all my family members and neighbours.

Pollution and Taboos

Pollution can manifest as temporary or permanent, voluntary or involuntary, affecting any member of society. The onset of menstruation, as well as childbirth, represent periods of involuntary female pollution.² During these times, women are considered untouchable, meaning they cannot be touched by others nor touch others or their belongings; they may even be considered invisible, especially to men. Consequently, they are temporarily relegated to the status of the lowest untouchables, akin to a Chandala (Manu, III, 239).



Figure 2. A signboard in front of a Hindu

² Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi, “Women's Pollution Periods in Tamilnad (India),” *Anthropos* 69, no. 1/2 (1974): 113–61,

temple. Image: Swami Shivapadananda, 2010

Segregation is enforced to shield women from harmful influences as their “impurity” attracts evil spirits, and also to safeguard others from contamination. During my menarche rituals, I had to stay in the same room for four days without touching anyone until the fourth day.

Menstrual Myths

As a pre-menstruating girl mandated to attend menstrual awareness classes in school, I recall feeling disappointed being forced to hear topics like dressing appropriately and behaving correctly because we were now “grown up”, while I could see the boys playing outside. According to a survey conducted by the NGO Child Rights and You (CRY) on World Menstrual Hygiene Day, close to 12% of young girls did not know the correct cause of menstruation, attributing it to a curse from God or caused by disease.³ It is disheartening to witness the widespread lack of awareness about women's bodies, as evidenced by one of my high school friends who was unaware of the location of her vagina despite us all experiencing the period.

Menstruation, a natural biological process, occurs in adolescent girls and women from menarche to menopause, and for those

with a regular cycle, it will occupy a total of seven years of their lives, or about one-seventh of a woman's life till menopause. A regular menstrual cycle is a vital sign for female adolescent health and maintaining menstrual hygiene is of utmost importance. Despite this, menstruation in India remains a taboo subject, surrounded by secrecy and shame, leading to silence and a lack of dialogue on the topic at all levels, including individual, family, and community.⁴ Mothers are often the primary source of information for girls, yet with 70% of mothers viewing menstruation as 'dirty'⁵ and lacking knowledge about menstruation, this only adds to the low self-esteem and continuing taboos surrounding menstruation.

Studies show that individuals, particularly those in low-middle-income and low-income groups, but not excluding the middle class, experience period poverty (poor access to menstrual education, hygiene products, and sanitation facilities).⁶ Women have been reported to use unsanitary menstrual absorbents like old clothes, rags, and even ashes.⁷ Mercy Alexander, an activist working for the fishing community in Kerala, recounted, "In the past, menstruating women would put sand in their lungis (a wrap-around garment in Southeast Asia) and twist them to use as absorbents. It required numerous menstrual awareness sessions to bring about a change in this practice."

³ The Hindu Bureau, “Close to 12% of Young Girls Think Menstruation Is a Curse from God or Caused by Disease: Study,” *The Hindu*, May 28, 2023, sec. Health, <https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/health/close-to-12-of-young-girls-think-menstruation-is-a-curse-from-god-or-caused-by-disease-study/article66900791.ece>.

⁴ Ministry of Health and Family Welfare Government of India, “Menstrual Health in India: An Update” (United States Agency for International Development), accessed February 26, 2024, https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00W863.pdf.

⁵ Ministry of Health, Menstrual Health in India, 9.

⁶ Poongothai Aladi Aruna, “Period Poverty Leaves 500

Million People in Menstrual Oblivion,” *The Hindu*, May 19, 2023, sec. Health. <https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/health/period-pov-erty-leaves-500-million-people-in-menstrual-oblivion/article66865860.ece>.

⁷ Trupti Meher and Harihar Sahoo, “Dynamics of Usage of Menstrual Hygiene and Unhygienic Methods among Young Women in India: A Spatial Analysis,” *BMC Women's Health* 23, no. 1 (November 6, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-023-02710-8>.

On my first period, I was given a piece of cloth to use. Clothes were used as adsorbents by tying a thread around the waist and attaching the cloth to it. Using cloth while going to school resulted in leakage, and I insisted on using pads. In response, one of my relatives said, "Girls nowadays have no respect for traditions. Our ancestors prescribed this for a reason. The thread tied around the waist will prevent uterine prolapse!"

A study in 2011 revealed some beliefs held by women about menstruation, for example not touching sour food like pickle or curd because at this time the female body emits a smell or radiation that can turn food bad!⁸

I can now see why I was not allowed to cross the sacred tulsi plant or neem plant in our courtyard. I was fearful that if I did so too many times, it would die like I was told, and I would be responsible for it.

Hygiene

Almost two-thirds of girls accept that they have a sense of embarrassment concerning their period. Access to sanitary pads was limited and almost half used homemade absorbents or cloth. Shyness in purchasing pads, difficulty in disposing of them, and poor accessibility were major reasons for not using sanitary pads.⁹

Disposing of pads also posed challenges for me. I used to burn my pads far from home, a secret known only to the women in the family. It was the same for many friends.

My mother shared her struggles as a young

girl using cloth pieces for her period. More than the irritation and problems of wearing it, she was concerned about drying the used cloth pieces without anyone seeing it. Even today, it remains a struggle for women to dry their undergarments in the open air, continuing poor hygiene and infections among women. Toilets in schools for girls, free or subsidised sanitary pad distribution, and toilets at home can remove social barriers to adopting menstrual hygiene practices. Even so, only a little over half the women in the first decade after menstruation use a hygienic method of menstrual protection.¹⁰

Working women face another set of problems during menstruation. These include having to work despite period pain, heavy bleeding at times, inadequate sanitary facilities at the workplace, and the need to travel, sometimes long distances. A working colleague in Kochi recounted how at a workplace she was instructed not to discard her used sanitary napkins. "So, I had to carry them back home in my bag where I also keep my food. It was a highly unpleasant experience."

Menstrual cups are a reusable alternative to sanitary pads for collecting blood. This one-time investment has changed the lives of many women including myself.

As a woman from a rural area, switching from cloth to pads was easy for me, but transitioning to menstrual cups was challenging. As a student with no income, buying menstrual cups was out of reach, but when I started working, it was one of my first purchases. I remember feeling frustrated when a family member

⁸ Tanu Anand and Suneela Garg, "Menstruation Related Myths in India: Strategies for Combating It," *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care* 4, no. 2 (2015): 184, <https://doi.org/10.4103/2249-4863.154627>.

⁹ *The Hindu*, Young girls think Menstruation is Curse, May 2023.

¹⁰ Menstrual Health in India, 2024.

cautioned against using them, saying, "Don't use these cups; they're dangerous. After marriage, you can do whatever you want if your husband allows it." This belief that I, as a woman, should not have autonomy over my body, even as an adult, was disheartening. I was not surprised that the usage of menstrual cups remains low in India.

One of the main reasons for this low usage is the requirement for vaginal insertion.¹¹ A large proportion of the population believes that using menstrual cups will break the girls' hymen, causing her to no longer be a virgin.¹²

The Month After

The ritual ended. Everybody enjoyed the feast. I received so many gifts. One of our neighbours was telling my younger sister that she was next. My younger brother was so jealous of me after seeing the gifts I received and kept saying I was so lucky to have thirandu kalyanam. Everything went back to normal, until the next month when I got my period. I was made to sit in the same room, but this time there were no gifts, no celebrations, no feasts. Nobody touched me. When I walked past someone, they moved out of the way. Whatever I touched, whether it was food, water, clothes, or anything else, became polluted. The rituals just stayed rituals; they did not change my life. Thirandu kalyanam was

just for a day; afterward, I felt polluted.

When the men in my family go to Sabarimala, coping with my period becomes even more challenging.

Sabarimala is a pilgrimage centre in Kerala where women between 10 to 50 years of age are not allowed to enter. Apart from a religious belief that the presence of fertile women in front of Sabarimala's resident deity, Ayyappan, endangers his celibacy, other explanations suggest that the exclusion of women is based on a menstrual taboo. Because women are unable to complete the mandatory 40-day *vratam* (purification period) as a consequence of monthly bleeding, they do not qualify to embark on the pilgrimage.¹³

I'm not even allowed to be in the vicinity of men in my family who are going to Sabarimala. Sometimes, I'm sent to a relative's house during that time to avoid polluting them.

Menstruation remains a 'woman's burden,' and as boys and men do not discuss it at all, it makes them feel they have no part in it. Such mystification of women's bodies and their physiological patterns amongst men can have serious consequences. Unaware of what menstruation involved, a 30-year-old man in Maharashtra killed his 12-year-old sister, after torturing her for three days, waiting for her to confess the source of the blood on the sheets. He had mistaken the bleeding at menarche to be the result of sexual intercourse.¹⁴

¹¹ IIPS and MacroInternational. *National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5)*, 2019–21 India Report. 2022. http://rchiips.org/nfhs/NFHS-5Reports/NFHS-5_INDIA_REPORT.pdf.

¹² Nappi, Rossella E., Guy Liekens, and Ulrich Brandenburg. "Attitudes, Perceptions and Knowledge about the Vagina: The International Vagina Dialogue Survey." *Contraception* 73, no. 5 (May 2006): 493–500. doi: 10.1016/j.contraception.2005.12.007.

¹³ Silvia Tieri and Emma Flatt, "Sabarimala: Controversy over Women's Access to the Temple". Institute of South Asian Studies, March 26, 2019, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/ISAS-Insights-No.-554.pdf>.

¹⁴ "Maharashtra: Man Mistakes Menstrual Blood to Be Result of Sex, Tortures 12-Yr-Old Sister to Death," *India Today*, May 9, 2023. <https://www.indiatoday.in/crime/story/ulhasnagar->

People love celebrating menarche while they hate menstruation. Now I fully understand what my mother meant when

she announced my period to everyone for the first time, "*Molu porathayi*" literally means "my daughter has been ostracised."

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