



Are Women Impure During their Menstrual Cycle? Not According to Jain Philosophy

It is sad that we who call ourselves Jains have to even address this issue. We have the benefit of the teachings of omniscient Tirthankars as well as the teachings of modern science, and yet we accept the treatment of women like untouchables on the name of religion. We forbid them to pray, visit a temple or participate in any celebration during their menstrual cycle. There has even been an instance where a woman against her wishes was removed from a hall, where (her own Varshitap) puja was being performed because she was considered impure to stay in the same room as the images of God. Now think about it - is this the way we view a natural phenomenon responsible for our very existence? And we call this religion!

Supporters of this ridiculous tradition point out to what they have learned through generations or to what a particular monk may have told them or to a religious book they may have read. Some say there is scientific evidence and yet when asked, could not come up with one.

Being only a student of Jain philosophy and not an expert, I decided to do further research on the subject. I reviewed several books and spoke to many scientists, Jain scholars as well as monks. Here are my interpretations.

Science deals with the physical and emotional changes in women during the menstrual cycle, including hormonal changes. But it does not make any judgment on the purity or impurity issue. Some authors, colored by social hierarchies may interpret these changes as impure and falsely put the onus on science.

None of the religious books supporting this tradition gave any logical reasoning for this. All of them mainly referred to a tradition going back thousands of years, and showed a proper way of carrying out this tradition (su-sanskar). One book written by a Jain monk even laid out a list of 46 rules women must abide by during a menstrual cycles. Rules included: not to brush, have a bath or comb their hair; not to breastfeed infants; not to study with children; not to read, write, talk or sing; to sit in one place for 72 hours and then spray cow's urine (gaumutra) to purify that place! He even went so far as to tell men to beware since there is a constant flow of poison from a woman's body during menstrual cycle, talking to her or touching her or eating food cooked by her would spread this poison in your body causing fatal diseases; thus stay at least 3.5 yards away from her! This book first caused disgust and then sadness in me to see that some of our monks who we turn to for knowledge and guidance are instead spreading ignorance and are using fear instead of factual reasoning.

Jain philosophy is rooted in Shramanic stream of thought going back at least 4000 years, believing in the concept that good conduct which is self-motivated as the key to achieving liberation. Mahavir clarified many of the original thoughts of Shramans and gave Jainism its highly scientific and rationalistic character through philosophy. He stressed on the importance of Rational Knowledge, Rational Vision and Rational Conduct.

He also laid down the path to liberation through non-violence, self control and penance. In all conduct, Jainism stresses the importance of thought, speech and action, with greater emphasis on thought. Thus, on the issue of Purity - purity of thought, speech and action are stressed and nowhere is it said or implied that the bodily functions or the natural cycle causes us to be impure.

Ahimsa as taught by Mahavir is not limited only to bodily harm. Not hurting others mentally or emotionally is as important. Doing so on the name of religion is preposterous. Mahavir himself postponed his renunciation of worldly things till his parent's death in order NOT to hurt their feelings, he also waited a little longer at his brother's request.

In my opinion, if there is any life in the images of Tirthankars we so dearly worship, tears would roll out of their eyes to see such an atrocity being committed on their name. I feel that in the light of Jain philosophy, this tradition is wrong. Majority of the monks and scholars I talked to agreed; while the rest evaded the issue. One monk told me that even female monks (sadhvijis) continue their daily routine during their menstrual cycle! Some point out that this is a cleanliness issue and agree that if a woman feels clean; to stop her from going to the temple or performing religious activity to elevate her soul wouldn't be right. Another point of view suggests that because of heightened emotions during the menstrual cycle, women may stay away from temples or praying. According to my thinking, since going to the temple or praying helps us calm down, wouldn't it be advisable to engage in these activities during heightened emotions!

In conclusion, I have seen no evidence either in science or in Jain philosophy making women impure during their menstrual cycle. To think otherwise is impurity in our thoughts. This tradition however had social reasoning, giving women a break from their daily hard work and a chance to relax for three days in a month. But it has been distorted beyond recognition from its original intent, and this new demeaning form is being perpetuated by our ignorance. It is time that we end this unfair tradition and truly practice what we teach our children about Jainism. Universal love, equality and respect towards all, in thoughts, words and action.

I would like to end by the following thought;

Jain system of purification is based on the quest for true knowledge. Even the term used for liberated. Keval-jnani means omniscient. Ignorance is not commended in Jain philosophy. The blind following of tradition perpetuates ignorance, which falls under the definition of violence. People bound by rules without understanding the meaning, forget that the important thing is the discipline of mind and the purification of the soul, not following rules like lifeless puppets and earning the applause of the masses.

Efforts towards reformation by unbiased analysis should not be condemned in order to blindly support and preserve the tradition. Mahavir, a reformer himself, said to Gautam,

"Accept not what I say as truth because it is backed by tradition, or because it is the law of the land, or because it sounds good, or because it comes from your teacher. Accept as truth only that which is sagaciously acceptable to reason as well as sentiment."