

FROM FIXITY TO FLUIDITY: MENSTRUAL RITUAL CHANGE AMONG HINDU
WOMEN OF NEPALESE ORIGIN

by

NITIKA SHARMA

B.S., Northern Arizona University, 2006

A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Sociology
2014

This thesis entitled:
From Fixity to Fluidity: Menstruation Ritual Change among Hindu Women of Nepalese Origin
written by Nitika Sharma
has been approved for the Department of Sociology

Joanne Belknap, Ph.D., Chair, University of Colorado at Boulder

Janet Jacobs, Ph.D., University of Colorado at Boulder

Sanyu Mojola, Ph.D., University of Colorado at Boulder

Amy Wilkins, Ph.D., University of Colorado at Boulder

Alison Jaggar, Ph.D., University of Colorado at Boulder

Date: May 6, 2014

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

IRB Protocol # 0909.18

IRB Protocol # 0410.3

Sharma, Nitika (Ph.D., Sociology)

From Fixity to Fluidity: Menstruation Ritual Change Among Hindu Women of Nepalese Origin

Thesis Directed by Professor Joanne Belknap

A common endeavor in the field of menstruation studies has been to examine the positive/negative dichotomy of menstruation rituals, the embodiment of purity/pollution by women and the oppression/empowerment duality often accorded to women's experience vis-à-vis the rituals. By bypassing this binary allotment and understanding of the nature of the rituals, this qualitative study investigates how menstruation rituals serve as a case study for a deeper understanding of women's agency in patriarchal societies and the changing role of patriarchy in traditional cultures in contemporary times. The research draws upon 62 in-depth interviews among Hindu women of Nepalese origin in Bhutan, India, Nepal, the U.K., and the U.S. about their understanding of menstruation rituals in their social milieu and their perception of themselves as practitioners of these rituals.

By using various typifications of ritual performance as ports of analysis, my study trails the following issues surrounding menstruation: women's perception of the rituals within a religious context and the adaptive modalities of religiosity they undertake to make meaning of their religious selves; women's impression of their menstruating, ritualized bodies as agentic selves; and the transference of the rituals and their meanings from one generation to another and one geographical space to the next.

I dedicate this dissertation to Mua,
who always maintained that the greatest tool you can give a daughter to prepare herself
for womanhood is the gift of education.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the participants of this study without whose contribution this work would not have been possible. Thank you for opening your doors and sharing with me details about this most intimate bodily phenomenon.

Thank you Amit for being the solid brick wall that held me up during trying times and provided comfort and epitomized resilience at the same time. Your stimulating conversations, your unwavering interest in my papers and articles, your interest in all of my scholarly pursuits make you deserving of the “D” of my Ph.D. None of this would have been possible without you. I appreciate your sacrifices, I laud your patience, and I marvel at the level of interest you showed in my work. I look forward to one day sharing a similar journey with you when we produce our first formal collaborative work together.

I would also like to extend my gratitude and appreciation to my family members who have supported me every step of the way. While they have been miles away, I have felt their warm presence throughout my stay in the United States and even more so during my dissertation writing phase. Thank you for your endless support in making this project possible.

This project would not have taken shape had it not been for the constant support from my dissertation committee. Joanne, the level of nurturing you provide your graduate students makes them produce the best work possible. Thank you for creating a safe atmosphere where I had room to not just vent about academic issues but about my personal problems as well. You do justice to the word “advisor” by creating a platform where fellow graduate students can learn from one another and you about myriad issues like grant writing, article submissions, conference presentations, comprehensive exam preparation, dissertation writing and finally the dissertation defense process. You have always been supportive, encouraging and, most importantly, available to address my petty issues and grave problems. Thank you for allowing for the growth of me as an academic at my pace and thank you for considering me worthy of sharing authorial credits. Your genuine interest in my work and career advancement highlights your fine capabilities as an advisor and this genuine interest of yours propels me to want to perform well not just as an academic but also as a good human being.

Janet, thank you for teaching some of the most eye opening and intellectually challenging classes of my graduate career. Also, the support and guidance you provided by helping me design the interview guide helped me gather some of the most heartfelt and rich narratives from my research participants. Sanyu, I would not be exaggerating if I said I would not have finished writing the dissertation in the given time frame had it not been for you gentle yet firm nudge in the right direction. My final dissertation is an ode to a selfless academic who poured her energy into making the final product smart, witty, and intellectually honest.

Amy, your class taught me to look at analysis and writing as a puzzle that looks more complete the more time you spend on it. Your writing has inspired me to produce pieces

that are straightforward without being boring, and are uncomplicated yet intellectually challenging. Dr. Jaggar, your class posed some of the most stimulating conversations that I have been a part of while at CU. Thank you for helping me frame my research project with the feminist twirl it ultimately received.

To my dear friend Amanda, the graduate school experience would have been bland without you. Thank you for being the one person on whom I could always depend, and thank you more for reading numerous versions of my papers: your suggestions only made them better. To Adelle, Mollie and Mary, thank you for being the cheerful, optimistic faces that made coming to Ketchum 409 and classes more fun.

And finally, I would like to thank the grant institutes at CU and the Open Society Foundations for topping my coffer so that I could travel to the various venues around the world to make this study possible.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGES
I. INTRODUCTION	1-24
II. RESEARCH METHODS	25-48
III. UNDERSTANDING MENSTRUATION RITUALS	49-78
IV. RITUAL PURITY AND POLLUTION	79-100
V. ADAPTIVE RELIGIOSITY	101-126
VI. INTERGENERATIONAL AND TRANSNATIONAL TRANSFER OF RITUALS	127-156
VII. CONCLUSION	157-170
REFERENCES	171-187
APPENDIX	
A. CONSENT FORM I	188-189
B. CONSENT FORM II	190-191
C. INTERVIEW GUIDE	192-193
D. RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS	194-194

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Trishna, a stay-at-home mother of two in the United States, is trying to finish cooking four batches of dinner for her family for the next few days. She has felt the first pangs of her looming menses and wants to get the task done before the first droplet of blood nudges her toward the role of a temporary untouchable in the hearth of her own home. Without her domestic presence, the family becomes incapacitated in running the daily business of the home. Her children are too young to help and her husband has never embraced the mundane tasks of the kitchen.

Asmita, a newly married 25-year-old and a resident of a small town in Nepal, rushes to the confines of her room to conceal her listlessness, which she recognizes as the earliest sign of her menstrual period. She now has to get her bedding ready for the next few days so that she does not soil the sanctity of the bed that she and her husband share. Twenty-one-year-old Srija in India, on the other hand, is secretly plotting her next temple visit as she is menstruating. This is her ploy of getting back at her grandmother who notoriously preaches the “damnation theory” for young women who do not abide by the taboos of religious isolation imposed during menstruation.

These three women of Nepalese origin living in different parts of the globe are all bound by one common custom: menstruation taboos that regulate their religious participation, sexual pursuits, and their involvement in domestic chores around the kitchen. From the accounts provided by the three women, the taboos appear constricting and binding; these are, however, not always so. In fact, most women share a conflicting relationship with the rituals surrounding the taboos: they consider them hindrances that forbid the performance of day-to-day tasks while also

embracing the rest period the taboos bring along; they question the public display of the implementation of the taboos while being relieved at the personal time the taboos allow for during menstruation; they look upon them as restricting codes that bind them from engaging in religious quests even when they are willing to acquiesce to the stipulation of the menstrual codes for fear of infuriating the Gods. This conflicting relationship that women share with menstruation rituals will come to the fore in this dissertation as we examine women's narratives behind following the menstruation rituals associated with the taboos in different manifestations depending on their social milieu.

A deeper contemplation of the excerpts above reveals the changing topography of the landscapes that are homes to Nepalese people across the globe. With change being the norm in this era of rapid globalization, two influential structures that must be explored when examining the shifting experiences of Nepalese women in Nepal and in the diaspora are the influence of patriarchy on women's lives and the impact of women's agency—whether in the form of direct resistance to patriarchy or in subdued forms working from within the confines of patriarchy—on this patriarchal structure. The section below provides a glimpse into these terrains while exploring how these concepts are essential to the understanding of any social phenomenon that Nepalese women undertake.

Patriarchy and its Modern Outlook

Traditional societies deeply engirdled by the institution of religion are often seen as fertile grounds for the existence and preservation of patriarchy. Nepal is one such society where Hindu patriarchy has made its mark not just historically but in present times as well (McHugh 2002). Traditionally, the Hindu patriarchal machinery had revolved around the preservation of land, women's sexuality and the upholding of rituals around land and women (Yalman 1962).

The current form of patriarchy draws its foundation from the traditional form but has transformed its outlook. It is modern in design and like the changing Nepalese society has morphed into a variety that is palatable and does not induce outrage among its citizenry. What does this form of patriarchy look like and, perhaps more importantly, how does it sustain itself?

The changing terrain of patriarchy has been documented well by scholars (Kaser 2008; Miller 1998; Moghadam 1996; Walby 1990). In the midst of the attention patriarchy has been receiving, Kandiyoti (1988) discovered a novel approach of understanding different forms of patriarchy through “women’s strategies in dealing with them” (275). By understanding patriarchy through this instrument of “patriarchal bargain” women were participating in, Kandiyoti provides a more nuanced approach of comprehending and accepting women’s active or submissive resistance when faced with various forms of oppression.

Of the two forms of patriarchy Kandiyoti explores, classic patriarchy is well suited to understand the patriarchal system permeating the lives of the Nepalese in Nepal and in the diaspora. Classic patriarchy, Kandiyoti notes, is exemplified by “women’s accommodation to the system” (275). In contrast to overt forms of resistance, women in this form of patriarchy adhere to strategies that maximize their security in a society where their status is devalued and their labor capital in and outside the home is rendered invisible (Kandiyoti 1988). Given their subordinate status, women’s willing participation in the patriarchal structure can be a perplexing phenomenon to understand. This disposition, Kandiyoti explains, is made possible by the continued dominance of patrilocal, patrilineal households, with the senior most men holding sway over all decision-making. In addition, the distinct invisibility of women’s labor in this patrilocal, patrilineal domain denotes that the only form of power that they can wield in their lifetimes is when they gain the position of seniority among women, which puts them in positions

of authority: the subordination to men is, therefore, offset by the authority older women wield over younger women. This cyclical form of power acquisition from mother-in-law to daughter-in-law at the passing of the former and the thirst for inheriting of power in whatever limited capacity results in women actively reproducing the very system that conspires against them. Often enough women come to endorse the success of the male dominated model by focusing on this piecemeal access to power, not always realizing that the very structure of patriarchy precludes them from realizing their subservience.

With the changing façade of the Nepalese society and a steady increase of nuclear families (Goldstein and Beall 1986), what then causes this system to persist? Kandiyoti's explanation partially illuminates why this system of subordination exists. With the patrilocal, patrilineal family structure at its crossroads, women in the system still seek the protection they seemingly got out of their patriarchal bargain, and in seeking this protection from the men in their smaller, nuclear households they are willing to be subservient actors who will exemplify "submissiveness and propriety" (Kandiyoti 283). While an argument worth exploring, this explanation highlights only a fragment of the story. Women's active participation and collusion in practicing various forms of patriarchal bargain that reproduce their own subordination in classic patriarchy could also have left remnants behind. As women often reproduce and help flourish the very system that oppresses them, the weakening of the system does not necessarily bear witness to the demise of the apparatus that supported its framework. In other words, women's collusion against the system by working within its confines could also have created an environment where patriarchal bargaining still persists albeit in changed forms. In addition, in societies where women have taken on the task of regulating the social and the religious orders at the familial level, patriarchy often gets masked as religious patriotism, traditional safeguarding,

and cultural preservation, and an inkling of these varieties of passing can be easily detected among the Nepalese women I have studied. Furthermore, women's increasing autonomy in the domestic as well as the occupational sector often hints at women's repudiation of submissiveness and the traditional form of propriety, a decision that is often made in consultation with a male counterpart. This variety of autonomy where the patriarchal principles are concealed by a type of egalitarianism that is "allowed" and "approved" by the male counterpart needs a nomenclature that captures the reach of patriarchy while also emphasizing a form of agency that is defiant and accommodating as women find new ways to bargain for their autonomy.

Agency and its Position in the Patriarchal Domain

To understand the changing landscape of patriarchy, it is also essential to examine the agency that women have wielded in their changing social milieu. Bennett (2005) defines agents as those who have "a capacity to act on their own behalf." As simple as the above definition is, the complexity of the term can be elucidated if we ponder over the nuances of the terms "capacity" or "behalf." Therefore, a better understanding of the term necessitates a foray into the different types of agency exhibited by actors (agents).

The scholarly discourse on agency has moved well past understanding agency as the demonstration of autonomous free will. With a more diverse framework for understanding the term as existing between the two extremes of autonomous free will and total subjugation, the concept has procured more room to demonstrate its scope and also more expanse to reveal the human capacity to act on her own volition.

Taking a pendular swing away from the two extremes, scholars often focus on women's agency in terms of strategic compliance whereby women adapt the religious rituals to suit their social milieu, oftentimes for extra-religious ends (Afshar 2008; Gallagher 2007; Mir 2009).

When exercising this form of agency, women are typically mindful of the limitations placed on them by social constraints while also being cognizant that they can, on occasions, act in opposition to precisely the same social constraints (see Fraser 1992; Jaggar 2007). In a similar vein, women also adopt a form of agency where they both resist and acquiesce to the interpretation of the religious edicts to satisfy their understanding of the religious laws (Seigelshifer and Hartman 2011; Torab 1996).

Mahmood (2005) offers an unorthodox illustration of “agentival capacity,” which is “entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms” (15). By allowing agency to be substantiated by resistance, subversion, and acceptance, Mahmood has opened avenues to look upon agency as a “capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable” (18).

Similar to Mahmood’s modality of agency is the manifestation of agency by way of complete conformity (Griffith 1997; Nisa 2012). The conversation around this display of agency in scholarly circles often grows contentious when women’s complicity in traditional religions comes under scrutiny. In showcasing women’s agency, most scholars attempt to decipher the strategies women use in tactical avoidance of certain religious duties or partial acceptance of similar religious rituals (Narsimhan 2011; Ulrich 1992). However, a growing number of scholars are more mindful that wielding agency does not necessitate the gain of extra-religious ends by using means like situational avoidance or partial acceptance. These scholars are vocal in their assertion about the influence of agency even in women’s strife for orthodoxy (Avishai 2008; Bucar 2010; Hartman and Marmon 2004). They are also welcoming of the concept of the self as the source of agency as well as agency accorded by mediators like priests, religious texts, and Gods, which equip women with the capacity to consent with and dissent from moral teachings,

consciously or subconsciously, with or without prior intent, for the simple purpose of becoming religious individuals.

A case study of menstruation rituals among Hindu women of Nepalese origin offers a fertile landscape to explore the transforming terrain of patriarchy and delineate the compliant complexion of agency that creates room for the overt application of agentival capacities while also acknowledging the importance of diminutive configurations of agentival capabilities that women are able to showcase in their respective social milieu. Menstrual taboos then provide a befitting site for the examination of how the patriarchal apparatus still functions in a domain that has come to be regarded as regulated solely by women. This then makes the uncovering of various forms of agency that women wield in patriarchal societies even more paramount.

Menstruation, while a phenomenon as old as the human race itself, began receiving unbridled attention from academics not very long ago. This attention has spanned an array of disciplines from Biology to Anthropology, from Medicine to Sociology. In the midst of this growing interest what became inevitable were the varied perspectives and methods in which this universal phenomenon came to be studied. In an effort to add to this ever-growing line of inquiry that is menstruation studies, this dissertation adds another facet to this complex biological phenomenon with influential sociological underpinnings. It is this sociological rendition of the biological phenomenon that this dissertation caters to, allowing for an honest understanding of this phenomenon by the people who experience it: women.

The telling of this story requires the comprehension of a number of things: Firstly, I, as perhaps the first participant of this study, have felt the sting of the social execution of this phenomenon, which in many ways propelled me to conduct the study in the first place. Secondly, menstruation is considered a very mundane matter by many of the participants of this study—a

monthly occurrence for most women that hardly requires the theorizing that I, as the researcher, was looking to provide it. This ironically translated into me trying to tell a story that the participants thought was one that was not worth telling. Finally, these very participants also chronicled in various ways (which I will discuss in greater detail throughout the length of this dissertation) the significance of this mundane biological phenomenon in their everyday lives in the various social settings in which they resided, thus reinforcing my belief that, indeed, this story was definitely worth exploring.

The facet of menstruation that this study investigates is menstrual taboos or more specifically menstruation rituals surrounding the taboos. Now, menstrual taboos while not universally occurring do exist in subtle forms in most cultures. Even in the West where the phenomenon is treated as a private monthly occurrence, a heavy shroud of silence about it in everyday life amid an outburst of commercial attention in various media sources hint at the proscriptive attribute rendered to this otherwise considered taboo-free natural phenomenon (Dunnivant and Roberts 2012; Kissling 2006). In various other societies around the world, the taboos associated with menstruation come draped in fabrics of various kinds. While some consider the rituals to be burdensome, many others find them to bring reprieve from their busy domestic domain. Others hardly give these rituals much thought—they are but rituals that need to be carried out (See Buckley and Gottlieb 1988). A personal example will perhaps bring more light to the perception continuum that menstrual bodies have regarding menstruation rituals.

Ever since I spent my menarche in an isolated corner of my parents' house several years ago, I developed a special distaste for the rituals. The practice of isolating a young girl who was just becoming aware of her bodily changes was disconcerting to me. Yet, I carried out the rituals in their entirety and stayed in a room shielded from the male gaze and the light of the sun (also

considered a male gaze) for seven days. My compliance did not end there. I, also, religiously followed the practices every month thereafter, though I failed to understand their usefulness and could not make sense of the inequity being fostered by alienating women from the very hearth to which they were so strongly linked. Not surprising then I let go off the rituals as soon as I left my parents' home.

My mother and aunt, on the other hand, do not seem to understand the disdain I feel about these practices. For them, the rituals indicate the temporary arrest of participation in household chores, a phenomenon they secretly look forward to with great enthusiasm. Several of my cousins who grew up in the same city as I did spent no time bemoaning what I thought to be unfair practices. They simply carried out what they thought was a ritual every menstruating woman/girl needed to observe. To them, the rituals needed no further deliberation. As convenient as this kinswoman sampling was, similar results can easily be obtained if one were to adopt a more scientific form of sampling. By selecting a varied representation of women of Nepalese origin, this dissertation will provide clarity about the personal meanings menstruation rituals have for these women who have opinions that fit somewhere along the perception continuum.

To glean a brighter light on the range of possibilities that lie within this continuum, this dissertation project pays special attention to the voice of the menstruants. Their narratives about menstruation as a biological and social phenomenon, the rituals surrounding menstrual isolation, the role of religion in assisting, managing, or controlling the menstrual body, the expectations or mandates from society about women's menstrual duties, and finally women's understanding of all these phenomena as separate and amalgamated entities provide us with a wholesome picture as to what the menstruation phenomenon actually means for individual women living as social beings. Thus, throughout this dissertation I will draw heavily upon these narratives to showcase

the meaning of menstruation as a social phenomenon for women and what these meanings underscore about the changing nature of menstruation rituals themselves.

Purpose of Dissertation

Currently, the scholarship on menstruation is teeming with the excessive analysis of women's agency even within the confines of power structures that dominate them. This perspective, I posit, while beneficial, silhouettes aspects of menstruation taboos and rituals that demonstrate the significance of religious adaptivity, change as a prototype of not just progress but also compromise, changing rituals as tools to gather knowledge about the intergenerational transfer of rituals and the acculturation pattern among migrants. These types of analyses have been missing in the scholarship of menstruation studies. More specifically, research on menstruation studies with Nepalese women has been limited to the scrutinizing of decades old anthropological pursuits or quantitative endeavors with a focus on public health initiatives that although important are not capable of answering important questions about the nature of the rituals in contemporary society in the former case and in-depth exposition about the nature of the taboos and rituals in the current socio-religious climate in the latter case.

This study provides an analysis of the narratives of changes in menstruation rituals and imparts insight on how a ritual and a traditional practice is passed across generations, how compliance with rituals is monitored—both by the women and the society they live in, and how the domain is changed in the process. I offer that the transformations are a product of negotiations (that need not be measured in a positive/negative dichotomy) between Nepalese women and their changing lifestyle as they attempt to make sense of and respond to challenges while reshaping the ideologies of the taboos.

While some may argue that the changes associated with the taboos being transformed from stringent to less rigorous ones seem particularly progressive, the study frames how the changes are not just an indication of growing agency in the hands of women but also an indication of the ways in which women redefine the meanings of the taboos based on the collective notions, ideas, and beliefs that reflect their moral position of the society. This study makes room for further understanding the tug between the continued observance of the rituals on the one hand and making way for doing away with the rituals on the other hand and the veiled role of patriarchy in adjudicating this contest.

A brief chronicle of the history of menstruation rituals and taboos will provide us with a concrete understanding of how the taboos surrounding menstruation have been understood and theorized by scholars in various disciplines.

Menstrual Taboos

There is a significant body of literature on menstruation taboos in a variety of disciplines. Given the expansive width and the breadth of the literature, the analysis of menstruation pollution practices in their entirety is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Instead I summarize the evolution of these analyses, followed by an exploration of menstrual taboos in Hindu religious texts, and then delve into the more specific dissection of Nepalese taboos.

Taboos around Menstruation

Menstruation is a topic that has been analyzed to a great extent by biologists and anthropologists alike. Not only has the biological strata of it been studied and critiqued, the cultural aspect has also been thoroughly investigated. For those anthropologists and biologists studying menstruation practices, what has been pervasive in the comparative research is the “universal” presence of menstruation taboos (Montgomery 1974; Owen 1993). Time and again,

menstruating women are depicted as impure and menstrual blood is portrayed as so strong as to contaminate not just plants and water but fellow humans as well (Delaney 1988; Grahn 1993; Shrestha 2012). Another dominant theme in ethnographic findings is the perception of women as oppressed because of societal expectations to adhere to the menstrual practices (see Delaney 1988; Delaney, Lupton and Toth 1976; Weideger 1977; Young and Bacdayan 1965). While the current trend in understanding menstrual taboos has shifted to highlighting not just the negative aspects but the positive features as well and the taboos understood as revealing more than the level of women's oppressions, these ethnographic findings have also gained popularity in and outside of academia and have also managed to establish themselves as truisms (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988: 7).

Attempts have also been made to identify a universal explanation of the origin and the subsequent performance of the taboos. These explanations have come from psychological, biological, and social perspectives. The following sections address these disciplinary perspectives.

Psychological/Psychoanalytical theories

Two theories used to explain menarchial ceremonies also throw light on the psychological conflicts that menstruation arouses in women and men. Borrowing from Sigmund Freud's thesis of the arousal of pre-oedipal aggressive impulses in women during sexual initiation toward the man who robbed her of her virginity, psychoanalytic scholars suggest that these impulses are evoked not by sexual initiation but by the onset of menstruation. They, therefore, surmise that the ceremonial menstrual isolation, social sequestration, and taboos that are distinctive features of many menarchial ceremonies are mechanisms that keep women's aggressive urges at bay (Bonaparte 1953; Daly 1950).

The second theory focuses on the psychological conflict menstruation arouses in men. Bruno Bettelheim (1954) suggests a hypothesis that posits that menstrual taboos are a product of envy of women's capacity to bleed from the genitals. This, he proposes, explains why many societies adopt customs of initiation rites for males that include making boys bleed. Bettelheim's model interprets male initiation rituals as an attempt to imitate women's child-bearing nature. He, thus, posits that menstrual taboos are a result of reverence that men have for women's reproductive capacity.

William Stephens (1961) makes an attempt to explain menstrual taboos from a psychoanalytic perspective. This view serves to prove that taboos are explained not by envy of women's capacity to bleed, but by men's fear of castration. According to Stephens, the sight of menstrual blood or the thought of it causes great anxiety in men who are plagued by fear of castration. Thus, rituals related to menstruation serve as instruments that hold men's unconscious anxieties about castration at check. He further adds that the magnitude of these taboos varies across cultures based on the intensity of male fear of castration. Freud (1950) attributes the psychological factor behind the dread of menstruating women on the fear of blood, which, according to him, also served the purpose of regulating hygienic measures.

Not surprisingly, none of these theories gathered much momentum. The psychoanalytic model failed to explain cultural variation in menstrual practices and discounted the meaning of the complexity of the rituals. Further, its focus on the male psyche disregarded the social, cultural, and symbolic aspects of menstrual rituals from the women's perspective (see Buckley and Gottlieb 1988).

Biological explanations

A different set of theories proposes that menstruation taboos are more a product of

biology than a result of psychological processes. The toxicity of menstrual blood has been written about since the 1920s when Bela Schick, a physician, first conjectured that the menstrual blood was composed of menotoxins—chemicals that were responsible for the widely believed myths of spoiled pickles, turned wine, and withered plants (Knight 1991: 377). This theory has little to no biological corroboration on the authenticity of the toxins present and, hence, failed to interest menstruation scholars for long (see Buckley and Gottlieb 1988).

Structural functional theories

Researchers within the structural-functional tradition have interpreted practices related to menstruation as a consequence of the sexual antagonism that exogamous marriage brought along. Durkheim (1963) considered the development of social solidarity among clan members and exogamy to be directly linked to men's fear of women and menstrual blood. The latter part of this argument has been under scrutiny by theorists like Levi-Strauss (1969) who claim that menstrual blood invokes fear among men even within an in-group. Thus, they argue, exogamy could not have resulted from men's fear of menstrual blood.

Given such disconnect in Durkheim's (1963) suppositions, his theory has been amended in recent times to account for variation in sexual segregation by examining structural causes of broader sexual antagonism. M.J. Meggit (1970) and M.R. Allen (1967) sought to identify a pollution ideology based on the choice of selecting mates from communities outside of one's own.

Robert Murphy (1959), in his study of the Mundurucu of Brazil, posits that sex segregation and menstrual isolation practices are mechanisms by which the Mundurucu men preserve their dominance over women. Rife in these arguments is the prevalence of strict segregation rituals during menstruation in societies where strong solidarity among women exists.

By calling for structural segregation, men in these groups purportedly are more successful at maintaining male dominance.

Akin to this explanation, most interpretations of menstrual taboos are reductionist in that they predicate the taboos occurring in a social vacuum so as to encompass the variation of taboos across the globe (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988; Hoskins 2002). These rites considered in isolation rather than as a dynamic whole, however, give us specious information on the etiology of taboos.

A profusion of symbolic analyses of menstrual taboos has been constructed upon the theory of pollution. Mary Douglas's work *Purity and Danger* (1966) throws extensive light on the symbolic structures of pollution concepts and sociological ramifications of such symbolic structures. Although Douglas has shied away from writing solely about menstrual pollution, her investigation of pollution and of body symbolism following patterns of pollution places her in the forefront in the comparative cultural-anthropological study of menstruation.

Douglas investigates the treatment of the sacred as contagious and how it is attached to beliefs about the dangers of crossing forbidden boundaries. Douglas also traces the similarities between exotic rituals of the past and the everyday rituals we perform today to depict the slight difference in detail between the two forms of rituals. She writes, "... our washing, scrubbing, isolating and disinfecting bears resemblance to ritual purification—we kill germs, they warded off spirits" (1966: 33). As such, she provides us a new way to understand pollution rituals: an attempt to draw external boundaries against materials/objects (in this instance: blood) that appear out of the ordinary, that exude signs of danger and/ or power, and that seemingly defile individuals or the entire society.

A glance at the restrictions on Nepalese women's activities during menstruation helps us glean how Douglas's theory of dirt as "matter out of place" (1966: 36) occurs in a systematic

order, “which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications” (37). Therefore, pollutants are as much a product of cultural order as they are threats to it. Menstrual blood is a suitable substance to be perceived as pollution. It stands out as an anomaly when compared to ordinary blood. While normal blood can clot and the flow can be stanching, menstrual blood has a mind of its own; thus, menstruation, from Douglas’s perspective, can be regarded as a phenomenon that humans have no control over.

The theory of pollution dictates that this anomaly and disorder be curbed by stringent taboos. As disorder symbolizes danger and power, it is invariable that order be imposed on it (Douglas 1966: 94). Since menstrual blood is credited with powers perceived as more dangerous than benignant, restrictions are imposed on menstruating women from participating wholly in the functions of society for the duration of the menstrual cycle.

Douglas has encountered critics. Some researchers suggest that a pronounced focus on dirt and pollution stymies the understanding that segregation not only sequesters pollutants that are deemed dangerous and out of place, but also isolates people and substances to protect them (see Blystad, Rekdal, and Malleyeck 2007). Douglas also regards the sacred as “contagion” without leaving ample room to incorporate the idea of positive contagion, a phenomenon that is comfortably ensconced among the Hindus of Nepalese origin in an attempt to understand menstruation practices. Finally, the idea of the menstrual blood being polluting because it is a “matter out of place” is facile and does not take into account how certain societies are averse to the idea of considering menstrual blood to be contaminating (see Kharrazi 1980).

The most persuasive and the most popularly used theory that gained momentum in explaining the taboos is perhaps the one that employs oppression of women. This view is limited as it assumes that the taboos restricting women revolve just around the menstruating woman and

leaves the rest in the family and the community unscathed (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988, 9). It also ignores the possibility of these practices being empowering to women as has been suggested by many theorists (see Buckley 1982; Cicurel and Sharaby 2007; Gottlieb 1982; Kahn 1931; Powers 1980).

In accordance with the theory referring to the oppression of women discussed above, the custom of secluding menstruating women, often in special shelters, connotes the extent to which women are oppressed in the patriarchal order. The menstrual huts are often looked upon as the epitome of oppressive measures used by men to subdue women. These have, on the contrary, often been claimed to provide solidarity among women. In their anthology of scholarly research on menstruation, Alma Gottlieb and Thomas Buckley write that not much has been known about the seclusions (1988: 12). What is known suggests that there is great variation in how women from different cultures perceive the custom. Many of the studies on menstrual seclusion, therefore, are deficient. Also, lack of detailed studies of women's seclusions results in insufficient knowledge about the structural reasons behind the isolation and many unanswered questions about the process itself.

In an attempt to add meaningful insight into the ever-expanding literature on menstrual taboos, I deviate from highlighting the purity/ pollution dichotomy often associated with the rituals or the specificity of the rituals themselves. What I focus on is the taboos as practices and the consequences of the practices depending on how women define the meanings of the rituals around the taboos in their social milieu. Given the propensity of scholars to attribute a positive or a negative light to menstruating women and the rituals associated with menstruation, this study takes a more extensive approach and examines the following issues surrounding menstruation:

- 1) Women's notions and ideas about what constitute menarche and menstruation rituals and

how the latter impact women on a monthly basis;

- 2) The changes in rituals with the geographic/temporal relocation of the menstruants and how they perceive these changes;
- 3) Women's perception of the rituals within a religious context that preclude the adoption of a positive/negative dichotomy with regard to the menstruating woman;
- 4) The meanings of the rituals in a given social milieu; and, finally;
- 5) Women's impression of the menstruating, ritualized body as providing avenues of agency while simultaneously catering to the patriarchal, religious order.

While feminist scholars and feminist leaning academics have taken on the task of giving voice to women who partake in these rituals, studies that document women's understanding of rituals in their homeland and diasporic settings, the concomitance of women's religious and agentic selves negotiating ritual observance in traditionally patriarchal cultures, and the impact of intergenerational and transnational transfer of rituals and their reconstructed meanings in their social and cultural circumstances are few and far between. To fill this gap in the study of ritual transformation in the homeland and in the Nepalese diaspora, this study seeks to study the Nepalese women population in a number of settings as a way to delineate the importance of capturing the cross-cultural scope of changing menstruation rituals.

Recent studies have adopted approaches of veering away from the dichotomies and understanding the situatedness of the taboos in their social milieu (see Akin 2003; Hoskins 2002; Narsimhan 2011; Pederson 2002; Stewart and Strathern 2002). To be inclusive of the above-mentioned factors, I will take a three-pronged approach to this study on menstruation practices. I will delve deeper to look at the role of religion in identifying how menstrual taboos are transformed into a ritual stronghold among the Hindu Nepalese diaspora. My approach will also

include a closer look at the link between body and rituals and attempt to understand how women make sense of their ritualized bodies. Finally, my analyses will not view menstruation simply as a stand-alone phenomenon, but include the social context in which menstruation practices are deeply embedded. The following sections provide a brief background of the interpretation of the taboos in the religious texts and as practiced by women of Nepalese origin to help impart a better understanding of the intricate configuration of menstrual taboos.

Hindu Religious Texts and Menstrual Taboos

The inception of menstrual taboos can be found in the Hindu religious text Rig Veda. In this text, we find practices relating to the seclusion and restriction of menstruating women explicitly linked to the mythic drama of Indra's slaying of Vrtra (Bennett 1976; Chawla 1992). When Indra, the king of Gods, had slain Vrtra, a three-headed demon and a Brahmin, he was seized by sin. To exculpate himself of the blame and the guilt, Indra convinced women to take on one third of his guilt. Therefore, the guilt of the murder appears every month in the form of menstrual flow among women (Bennett 1976; Chawla 1992). On account of their temporarily impure bodies during menstruation, women must, therefore, observe certain restrictions. According to the text, a menstruating woman should not anoint her body, bathe in water, touch fire, eat meat, and look at the planets (Chawla 1992). The text also advocates that menstruating women sleep on the ground (Chawla 1992).

Other written traditions focus on women's behavior in relation to men. The lawbook of Manu or Manusmriti dating back to 200 B.C.E states, "Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence" (Manu IX, 3; Buhler, trans.). This excerpt lays the foundation of the positionality of women in Hindu society. Women are depicted as the weaker gender—forever in need of

protection. This stance allows men to take on the upper hand and establish themselves as the dominant kingpins in domestic and socio-legal domains.

The Manusmriti details the everyday functions that a menstruating woman and her husband must avoid. The husband must not sleep in the same bed with his wife no matter how strongly he desires to do so (Manu IV, 40; Buhler, trans.). If he happens to touch her, he must take a bath to purify himself (Manu V, 85; IV, 57; Buhler, trans.). If he indulges in sexual activities with a menstruant, he has to face the consequences—a marked diminution in wisdom, energy, strength, sight, and vitality (Manu IV, 41; Buhler, trans.). In contrast, if he is able to avoid her during the period then his vitality and strength will be enhanced (Manu IV, 42; Buhler, trans.). Furthermore, the husband is expected to avoid his wife when he is eating, and refrain from looking at her when she eats, sneezes, yawns, or sits at her ease (Manu IV, 43; Buhler, trans.). The text also lays the framework for when the woman becomes pure again. After the flow of blood has ceased, the woman is expected to take a regular bath as a cleansing ritual so that she is reverted to her former pure state.

The Vasistha Dharmashastra draws from the Manusmriti and reiterates that women are never fit for independence and that males are their masters. Setting tough standards for exemplary womanhood, the text states that a woman “who neither goes naked nor is temporarily unclean is paradise” (V, 1; Buhler, trans.). The text then follows with a set of practices for a menstruating woman. During her courses, a woman is declared impure for three days and nights (V, 5; Buhler, trans.). The level of pollution is further explained as such: “On the first day, she is declared to be [as polluting as] an untouchable; on the second, [as polluting as] a Brahmin-killer; on the third, [as polluting as] a washerwoman; on the fourth, she is purified” (Leslie 1989, 283).

During menstruation she is barred from applying collyrium to her eyes, anointing her body, and bathing her body—all linked to the idea of her sexual unavailability in lieu of her unattractiveness (V, 6; Buhler, trans.). Her sleeping quarters are now relegated to the ground where she is not allowed to sleep during the daytime. She is prohibited from touching fire or cleaning her teeth; she is barred from eating meat or looking at the planets. In addition, she is also forbidden to make ropes. She is also not allowed to drink out of a large vessel, or out of joined hands, or out of a copper vessel (V, 6; Buhler, trans.).

The Dharmashastra narrates how there is a feeling of loathing attached to menstruating women, and born out of this loathing is the saying of “she shall not approach” for the color of blood emitting from her is the color of brahmahatya (killing of a Brahmin) (Smith 1991: 23). The text also relegates Brahmins who have menstruating women in their houses and who have no ritual fire burning in their homes to Shudras—a lower class in the Hindu hierarchical chain. As will be clear from the account below, the rituals spelled out in the texts have been refashioned by the participants such that the rituals in their traditional archetypal forms are no longer practiced today.

Nepalese Menstrual Taboos

Nachune, the term commonly used to address menstruating women in the Nepalese vernacular, when translated directly into English means “untouchable.” The word functions both as a noun and an adjective. The usage of the word by women to describe themselves and their menstrual stage without hesitation reveals how tacit acquiescence is an important aspect in the perpetuation of what many scholars claim to be the domination of women. Traditional practices during menstrual seclusion require women to refrain from touching men for fear of making them sick; menstruating women are also prohibited from carrying out any religious rites (Bennett

1976). In accordance with some of the practices of isolation, women are barred from touching fruits, fetching water from the wells, watering plants, and milking cattle (Kandel et al., n.d.; Shrestha 2012). Some hold the belief that if menstruating women touch trees laden with fruits, the fruits either fall before they are ripe or shrivel and become inedible; wells are rumored to dry up if menstruating women fetch water from them; if the cattle are fed or milked by a menstruant, it is believed that the cattle will bleed (Shrestha 2012). In addition, Nepalese custom dictates that menstruating women and girls are barred from consuming milk, yogurt, butter, and other nutritious food and have to survive on bare essentials (Kandel et al., n.d.). The end of the menstrual taboo phase is denoted by a cleansing shower at the end of the fourth day (Narasimhan 2011). This marks women's ingress into the domain of performing their customary duties as a non-menstruating woman except for their involvement in religious rites and ceremonies. Only after the passage of the seventh day, following another cleansing shower, are women considered truly pure to participate in all activities. Most women believe that this orchestration allows for the complete cleansing of those who have longer bleeding periods.

In their most common manifestation, menstruation rituals include religious isolation, abstention from sexual and physical intimacy with spouse, and abstention from cooking. These practices all point to the private domain of the rituals, which are observed by members of the nuclear family and are kept cordoned off from the community. The private/semi-private nature of the rituals, however, is a recent phenomenon. It serves as progeny to the once-observed ritual of segregation in menstrual huts, which was a very public depiction of ritual practice (see Ulrich 1992; Narasimhan 2011). This modification leads us to believe that numerous changes have been introduced in the practice of menstruation rituals. These changes then provide a foray into understanding the agency wielded by women in working within the framework of menstrual

taboos while subtly pushing the boundaries of the framework to suit their everyday needs. The importance of a feminist understanding of this agency cannot be emphasized enough if we pay attention to the plethora of scholarship material that undermines this agency by labeling it as techniques that only allow for small changes while still keeping women in the throngs of patriarchal control. The dissertation will elucidate why the above-mentioned analysis can be deficient in providing a comprehensive vista of the role of women in bringing about much needed change in their social surroundings.

Dissertation Overview

In the chapters that follow, this dissertation will provide a broad outlook of what menstruation rituals mean for the women who experience the phenomenon of menstruation on a physiological as well as a social level. This understanding will help shed light on how the rituals have sustained for centuries even when they seemingly inconvenience women's everyday lives, how this perpetuity has been maintained by leaving room for change, and how menstruation management is a phenomenon that individual women have become adept at overseeing.

The dissertation is ordered as such: The second chapter details the settings in which the research was carried out, the study methods, the sample population, some methodological issues and the limitations of the study. Chapter three outlines the meaning-making approach adopted by women in understanding their menstrual identities. Chapter four problematizes the purity-pollution dichotomy of taboos and provides an overview of the purity pollution continuum in understanding the endurance of menstruation rituals. Chapter five examines how menstrual ritual practice becomes evidence of women's religious identity and how they adopt an adaptive pathway to religiosity while managing their menstrual selves. Chapter six provides an overview of the different ways in which the taboos evolve from one generation to another and one

geographic area to the next. Finally, in the concluding chapter, I present the empirical and theoretical contribution of the research and discuss the direction for future research in the field of menstruation studies.

CHAPTER II

RESEARCH METHODS

My interest in menstruation practices and the rigid grasp of these rituals among Nepalese women has burgeoned since I was twelve years old and spent my menarche in an isolated corner of my parents' house. Having been born into a Brahmin household with the paternal grandfather and grand uncles fulfilling the roles of benefactors of the village temple and also being staunch Hindu patriarchs meant that the ritual prescriptions I was forced to practice were of the stringent variety. The practice of isolating a young girl who was barely aware of her bodily changes was disconcerting to me. Yet, I carried out the rituals in their entirety and stayed in a room shielded from the male gaze and the light of the sun (also considered a male gaze) for seven days. My compliance did not end there. I, also, religiously followed the practices every month thereafter, until I moved away from my parents' home, though I questioned the designation of rituals as allowing women reprieve or of being designed for their ease and comfort.

Years later, I have geographically moved thousands of miles away from my place of birth, and I notice a general trend in these practices slowly making place for less stringent rituals among women of Nepalese origin. I first began conceptualizing the study when, in my interaction with women of Nepalese origin, I discovered that they had abandoned many practices related to menstruation. This aroused my curiosity as to why such practices were being relinquished.

My sojourns in different parts of the United States in the last few years made me certain that this giving up of Nepalese menstrual rituals, at least to some extent, was not just a phenomenon taking place among women of Nepalese descent in an isolated town in the U.S. Seeking to understand the reasons behind the relinquishing of these practices, I embarked upon

this study. Given my own transformations after living outside of Nepal, it seemed important to understand the evolution of Nepalese women's menstruation in a variety of countries, including Nepal. In the sections that follow, I will discuss the settings in which the study was conducted and outline the characteristics of the participants of the study. Next I will elaborate on the data collection method and the data analysis process used and finally I will outline some methodological issues I encountered and detail how I resolved or attempted to resolve them.

The Sample Setting

In order to explore the patterns in which women of Nepalese descent alter their menstruation rituals differently based on their social terrain, I conducted 62 semi-structured interviews with women of Nepalese origin in five countries: 17 in Nepal, 22 in the United States, 7 in the United Kingdom, 8 in India, and 8 in Bhutan between September 2009 and August 2013 (for a detailed breakdown, see Appendix D). I purposefully chose these countries to explore whether the practice of ritual modification was occurring in just the Nepalese diaspora or in Nepal as well. I looked at two of Nepal's neighbors, Bhutan and India, to draw parallels in the ways in which alteration of the rituals was occurring in the three nations. Since the Nepalese people in the two nations share similar lifestyles with the Nepalese in Nepal, I suspected that the adaptations of the rituals would be comparable. The strong Hindu influence that India wields has become diluted over the years when we observe the trend among practitioners of renouncing various religious rituals (Leslie 1992) and the efforts on the part of the Bhutanese government to subdue Hindu influence among the Nepalese population (Katel 2008) has been met with concealed but strong non-violent retaliatory measures by the Hindus by observing religious rites and rituals to the best of their abilities. Hence, while the two nations might appear to be contrasting comparison sites, they offer many similarities. This was strongly corroborated by the

interviewees of this study. On the other hand, I believed the United States and the United Kingdom would offer much different scenarios for women of Nepalese descent. With a distinct culture that is dissimilar to the ones found in Nepal, Bhutan, and India, it seemed likely that the U.S. and the U.K. would provide venues to chronicle varied experiences in the menstruation culture. Overall, my research confirmed my suppositions in both the scenarios, with the exception of some surprising anomalies in all five nations. The sections below will provide a more in-depth history of the diasporic journeys of the Nepalese into Bhutan, India, the U.K. and the U.S.

The Nepalese in Bhutan

A multitude of sources mark the immigration of the Nepalese into Bhutan. The earliest among these is recorded by Matthew (1999) who depicts Nepalese artisans immigrating to Bhutan at the special bequest of the Tibetan king Tsrong Tsang Gampo to build stupas and monasteries in Bhutan (Gautam 2013). Hasrat (1980) recounts a group of Nepalese being invited to Bhutan in the company of Guru Rimpoche Padmasambhawa to heal the Sindhuraja of Bumthang in the 8th century. Official historical records denote that Nepalese migration occurred in the year 1624 when 50 Nepalese families were dispatched to Bhutan to enrich and protect the country (Gautam 2013). This was done as a symbol of friendship between the king of Gorkha, Ram Shah and Dharmaraja Shabdgurung Nawang Namgyal of Bhutan. The 50 families that were sent to Bhutan settled along the southern border of Bhutan and represented a variety of caste and ethnic groups; the Brahmins, Chettris, Newars, Gurungs, Magars, Tamangs, and Sarkis comprised the migrating families with the intent to start a self-fulfilling Nepalese community that could meet its occupational and religious needs (Gautam 2013). A third group of Nepalese of both Indian and Nepalese origin also came to Bhutan during the years 1958-1959 to

participate as laborers in Bhutan's road-building and other developmental endeavors (Kohli 1996).

As the people belonging to the ethnic majority in Bhutan began to fear the growing political participation of the Nepalese with which arose the possibility of the toppling of the ruling power, Bhutan took steady action by giving impetus to the process of Bhutanization in the 1980s (Kohli 1996). This included making it imperative for all Bhutanese nationals to speak the national language, and wear the national costume. In a slightly tangential move, also began a sweeping ousting of illegal Nepalese immigrants. The driving out of the Nepalese in droves came about at the helm of an arbitrary measure that the government used to determine the legitimacy of their citizenship: any person of Nepalese origin who did not have domicile documents from 1958 or the years preceding were denied citizenship and the right to be in the country (Upreti 1996). The teaching of the Nepali language was banned from all Bhutanese school in the year 1991 (Upreti 1996). The ethnic conflict between the Lhotsampas, the people of Nepalese origin and the Ngalops, the dominant ethnic group and the accompanying cleansing process carried out by the Bhutanese government began earnestly in the early 1990s (Upreti 1996). This conflict shapes the current landscape whereby the Lhotsampas' practice of their unique culture and religion is in disfavor. As we shall see from the narratives of the Lhotsampas, this has not impacted their cultural observance of the menstruation rituals greatly given that the ritual practice is mostly limited to the private sphere. For the observance of other public rituals and festivals, the Nepalese population in Bhutan takes cautionary measures. This has also strengthened the determination of many Lhotsampas to bolster their resolve to be carriers of culture.

In Bhutan, with regard to the division of labor, women are mostly responsible for domestic work. Even the women who hold jobs outside of the domestic terrain are expected to come home and take on the responsibility of cooking, cleaning, and keeping the household running. During menstruation, other women or girls in the family take over the cooking duties and receive help from maids if the household can afford one. If no women are available then men reluctantly take on the task of cooking while the woman is menstruating. This allocation of tasks is similar for people residing in Nepal and in India with a few exceptions.

The Nepalese in India

The migration process for the Nepalese in Bhutan happened in waves and these spates of migratory journeys have been well documented. The process for the Nepalese in India took a slightly different route. The history of the Nepal-India territory delineation is fairly new and the making of boundaries took place after the Anglo-Nepal war of 1814-1816 (Kansakar 2001). Preceding the designation of India as a nation by the East India Company, what we now designate as the Indian and Nepalese territories were made up of small kingdoms. Therefore, it was only after the East India Company attempted to invade Nepal with the Anglo-Nepal war that the demarcation of the Indo-Nepalese border was carried out (Kansakar 2001). The current census data do not accurately depict the number of people of Nepalese descent in Indian (Hutt 1998). In recent years there have been many surges of Nepalese migration to India to seek jobs, but these migrations have failed to produced cohesive communities like the ones that had already been established before the recognition of India and Nepal as nation-states (Hutt 1998, Dixit 1988). Unlike in Bhutan, the Nepalese diaspora in India is an integral unit of the nation, with political rifts between the diaporic population and the nation being infrequent and controlled (Hutt 1998). With many similarities in religion and culture with the majority of the Indian

population, the Nepalese in India by far have maintained the closest kinship with the citizens of Nepal.

The Nepalese in the U.K. and the U.S.

The advent of a civil war in Nepal saw increasing numbers of international migration to the U.K. and the U.S. between 1998-2006 (Mishra 2011). The migration of the Nepalese to both these countries is fairly new with fluctuating numbers in the census before the 1980s because they were included under the “other Asian” category in lieu of their small numbers (Mishra 2011). In 1980, when the first accurate numerical figure can be traced, there were 844 Nepalese in the U.S. (Mishra 2011). This number has seen a steady increase in recent years. According to the Pew Hispanic Center's 2008 tabulations there were 29,176 Nepalese in the U.S. (Mishra 2011). Recent figures for the number of Nepalese in the U.K. are estimated to be 100,000 individuals including retired or active duty Gorkha soldiers, workers, and students (Adhikari et al. 2008). Given their diverse composition, the diaspora populations in these two nations are a heterogeneous mix.

The allotment of household tasks falls chiefly upon the women in the U.K. and the U.S. However, unlike in Bhutan, India and Nepal, men increasingly help with household tasks. Most men after having lived in these countries for some years have learned to cook and have become more invested in the upkeep of the home. Despite this sharing of responsibility, troubles arise during menstruation because men also take up the burden of being the primary provider. Among the majority of the participants from the two nations, men often worked long hours, some had taken up two jobs, others worked odd hours to allow the wife to have the normal schedule of working during the daytime. Women also often took at least a few years to acclimate themselves to the new environment before they began to look for jobs.

The Sample

Among the diaspora population in the U.K. and the U.S., all the women I interviewed are either first generation citizens of the diaspora nations who spent their adolescence and at least their early adulthood in Nepal or immigrants, thereby sharing a commonality with the women from Nepal of having learned and practiced the menstruation rituals in Nepal. While most women in Bhutan and India have been a part of the citizenry of their respective nations for centuries, they follow similar practices to those performed in Nepal, thereby allowing for a common comparative platform in the way the rituals are carried out among all participants.

Based on the Nepalese rendition of the Hindu caste system (for more details see Levine 1987), all of my participants are Hindu women who belong to the Brahman and Chettri caste and the ethnic sub-group, Newars. I chose these groups because women affiliated with these groups practice the distilled form of the traditional rituals as specified in the Hindu religious texts with slight variations in initiation rites between the Brahman and Chettris and the Newars. The sixty-two participants ranged in age from 21 to 86 years, with the majority of them falling in the 28 to 40 age range. The sample also includes five women who have reached the post-menopausal period. Although issues of recollection of events that happened ages ago deserve cautionary attention in the interviews with older women, the narratives they presented convinced me that these were stories that were frequently exchanged with younger women by way of reminding them of how the codes of the rituals had become weaker with the advent of modern times. This way, while a certain degree of forgetfulness or embellishment should be acknowledged, the veracity of the stories should not be completely distrusted.

They women came from various class backgrounds—the variation not always distinctly indicative of the way women adopted or modified rituals. While many women belonging to the

upper class and residing in Nepal, India, and Bhutan had the good fortune of relegating their duties to their live-in maids, many of them still modified the rituals associated with cooking and involved themselves in the daily tasks around the kitchen. The duty of cooking meals for their families was a task that many women took pride in and therefore their temporary departure from the duties in the kitchen would often mean that other women in the family or the maids undertook those tasks in their absence. In nuclear families, the daughters or the maids would often times take on this task. This seemingly smooth transition was not regarded as such by many women. The syncing of menstrual cycles meant that women sometimes had to use the help of their husbands, who most often were not trained to work in the kitchen. The entry of another person to take on the cooking tasks meant that women's ways of carrying out the day-to-day tasks were disregarded. Therefore, if and when possible they would alter rituals such that their presence in the kitchen was made possible. For the women interviewed in the U.K. and the U.S., the cost of keeping maids was considered very high. Thus, while income variation was clearly discernible, it had no clear-cut influence on modification practices. It is essential to note here that though the broad findings of the study could be used to understand the nature of menstruation taboos in different cultures, we must pay attention to the unique caste-related, social, religious, and diasporic elements in this sample before embedding the findings from this study in the substantial core of other empirical or theoretical inquiries.

Data Collection Method

After getting approval from the Institutional Review Board for interviewing human subjects, I recruited many of the participants after interacting with them during casual and formal gatherings at the various sites. During meetings with Nepalese women during festivals, birthday celebrations, and weddings, I casually broached the topic of my research and it never failed to

draw the attention of the women with whom I was conversing. While such venues often serve as fertile landscapes for sanctioning of moral and ethical boundaries, it is important to note that menstruation related sanctioning work never occurred in such venues. Casual conversations around menstrual rituals made quick rounds during our conversations only because I specifically broached them by highlighting the academic backdrop of my interest. Some participants prodded me to ask questions during the gatherings while others subtly veered the conversations to my area of interest even when the topic was not related to the discussions or the conversations. Helping a student in her research at a university in the U.S. must have frequently served as a motive for this interest because the participants proudly interjected many times that I was a model Nepalese student. This convinced me that the participants were enthused about my soon-to-be contribution in the field of academia and my research topic and were eager to begin the interview process.

The women seemed replete with ideas as to why they thought this fairly new trend of modifying menstrual rituals was being established. I came to recruit many of the participants in the study after having interacted with them during such meetings. I generated the remaining sample of women via personal contacts and referrals from women I had already interviewed. With some of the women who were referred to me by interview participants, the interviews tended to be formal at first, but the women opened up as I revealed to them my experiences with the rituals in Nepal, India and in the U.S. (Rubin and Rubin 2012). The use of snowball and referral sampling methods, while not optimum for generating a representative sample, provided a good recourse in getting to speak to participants who were initially hesitant to speak about this somewhat taboo subject (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981). I chose pseudonyms for all participants to protect their privacy.

Observational data collected during the course of the interviews and throughout my life as a menstruant have helped formulate the crux of my research questions. The very trend of modifying or abnegating the rituals as a point of consideration was observed during my various interactions with women of Nepalese origin. These data also helped me decipher that women had very individualized ways of observing menstruation rituals. Thus, a close scrutiny of the phenomenon from a young age helped me collect informal data, their germaneness being transparent at every step of the research process.

By keeping in mind that individuals understand their world in varying ways (Gubrium and Holstein 2003), I used a loosely themed interview guide to aid in the interviewing process. This semistandardized interview format was particularly helpful in drawing out variance in interviews by not restricting the respondents to close-ended questions (Wengraf 2001). The interviews were primarily conducted face-to-face in the woman's homes, public libraries, and by phone and skype, depending on the proximity of the participants' residence or area of work to the town I was visiting in each of the five countries. Given my familiarity with both languages, I administered the interviews in both English and Nepali (the mother tongue of people of Nepalese heritage and my native language). Interviews lasted from twenty minutes to two hours. Most of the interviews were tape-recorded. Some women were not comfortable with a foreign gadget being used as a recording device. They, therefore, politely declined my request to record them. For the interviews that were not recorded, I took meticulous notes to capture the depth of the conversations. I also chose not to use my hand-written notes as a substitute for actual quotes. Therefore, when I depict these women's narratives, I use paraphrased accounts. I transcribed all of the taped interviews and revisited the hand-written ones.

Data Analysis Method

In my feminist analysis I paid attention to the narratives that women present to understand how they navigate and negotiate cultural dicta and practices to define and redefine themselves and their menstruation practices (Collins 1991; Garcia 1997; Harding 1998; Kandiyoti 1988; Mohanty 1988; Rose 1997). I began data analysis concurrently while gathering data (Becker 1958). The coding process led to the development of concepts that explained the process behind the ongoing change or fixity in Nepalese women's menstruation practices.

In the next sections, I first outline how my positionalities impacted the research study: the interest in this particular study, the framing of the research questions, the analysis of the data, and subsequently the presentation of the findings. I then outline the feminist methodological issues I came across in different phases of the study. These issues were strewn across the span of the research process from the planning phase of the study to the final writing phase. While not all of the problems were fully resolved, I narrate in the section that follows the approaches I used to come to terms with the matter at hand or resolve partially or fully to make the research process as honest and honorable as was possible.

Dual Positionality: A Menstruant or a Researcher

As the first chapter very clearly laid out, I have perceived menstruation rituals as constricting and inhibiting. During my adolescence when I was living with my parents, I often had internal conversations about why women abide by the taboos and what they stood to gain from observing the rituals. From my perspective, they were at the losing end of the bargain: they were "marked" as impure; they could not participate in festivals; they could not go to temples; they had to sit on a separate stool to eat. Of course, these activities that I thought women were "deprived" of were based on my singular perspective. During my pubescent years, I spent numerous festivals being excluded from the celebrations because of my "impure" status. Adding

to this agony was the great deal of physical pain I felt during menstruation. Combined together these elements helped me paint the version of these rituals as binding, constricting, and restricting.

Once I moved away from my parents' house and went to Nepal for my undergraduate studies, I renounced the rituals in their totality. But I also quickly came to realize that in some circumstances some women actually stand to gain from following the rituals. For some women, this is truly the only "period of rest." While my initial disdain had not wavered, I had changed my position from wanting to do away with the rituals to making it a matter of choice. That is, I believed that those women who want to practice them should be allowed to and others should not be held accountable for not honoring them. I now realize that the simplicity of this option is what makes it so improbable. Menstruation rituals make for a complex unit: as a sociologist I have realized that, as a woman practitioner I have lived and observed that.

The sociologist in me sees the years of domination women have suffered and continue to suffer at the hands of patriarchal rule; the woman in me has experienced that, although in very subdued forms. The academic in me sees the ways women have helped legitimize a tradition that serves to do them disservice; the woman in me has perceived that but has had no vocabulary to express it. As a researcher, who is sometimes an "outsider" and more frequently an "insider," the duality of these positionalities have made me realize that this research endeavor while beginning with me is for all the women in my study and many more whom I never reached out to because deep within them are housed similar dual positions sometimes in tandem, sometimes in rivalry, all trying to make sense of themselves as a woman, as a matriarch, as a culture carrier, as a renegade, as a person who is simply trying to make life comfortable for her and everyone around her. Therefore, this dual positionality, should be taken into consideration while understanding

women's acceptance, modification, and renunciation of the rituals.

Feminist Methodological Considerations in Understanding Menstrual Taboos

Menstruation as Taboo

Symbolic analyses of menses built upon the concept of pollution and taboo have been pursued in the past, and this makes it more essential to understand the meaning of the word taboo in the context of its usage. Franz Steiner's (1956) translation of the Polynesian word tabu as "marked thoroughly" connotes neither a positive or negative dimension, and he suggests that the concepts of "holy" and "forbidden" are indissoluble in many Polynesian languages. Furthermore, Steiner writes, the antonym of the word tabu is not "sacred" or "defiled" but rather "profane," which carries the meaning "common" (as cited by Buckley and Gottlieb 1988:8). Gottlieb and Buckley, therefore, are quick to point out that the western view of menstruation and the monocausal stance taken by many westerners to explain menstrual taboos might stem from their paucity of the understanding of the word "taboo" (also see Stephens 1961; Weideger 1997; Young and Bacdayan 1965).

The pursuit of identifying women's "taboos" in societies, then, frequently leads to romanticizing a particular culture or exoticizing it and further complicates matters by making women's bodies the center of focus. While receiving warranted attention is not necessarily problematic, the quite recent depictions of women's bodies as weak, unclean, a symbol of fertility and therefore also a nucleus of vulnerability, and many other tertiary labels often follow, thereby rendering the initial pursuit of simply studying taboos moot and invalid (Loomba 2003). Furthermore, when the study population has infamous histories with colonization, the simple study of a taboo becomes entwined in discourses of power, subordination, marginalization, and

essentialism, which has the capacity to and often leaves the culture tarnished forever (Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Lewis and Mills 2003; Loomba 2003; Spivak 1990).

At a slightly less alarming level, the high levels of interest in exoticized taboos also precludes prospective studies on societies that give refuge to these taboos but view them as ordinary, inescapable rituals that are an undeniable part of human existence. Nepal, as a case study, offers a perfect example. While much attention is paid to the practice of Chaupadhi—the practice in Western Nepal that relegates menstruating women to cow sheds for a given duration as a means of removing them from the untainted, hallow areas of the home—as substantiated by the daily newspapers that regularly cover the subject matter, the monthly occurrence of religious isolation and the seclusion from kitchen duties practiced elsewhere in Nepal barely makes exciting fodder for researchers to lend interest upon. Thus, the common and the quotidian become overlooked, and the more sensational forms of the practices garner attention. This can be very problematic to both camps; one becomes a victim of over-study and the other fades to oblivion blinded by its much popular twin.

The gendered frame that is often utilized to understand these taboos as women's issues is replete with problems as well. When we look at the phenomenon as a “problem” that concerns women and, therefore, demands a critical eye to “solve” it, we are lending credence to a positivist framework that suggests there is a “situation” that needs to be “bettered” (see Bergeron 2001). Thus, we fall into the trap of legitimizing backwardness or exoticity and prescribing “corrective” measures to rid the problem. This also successfully works toward “othering” people, whether wittingly or inadvertently (see Ahmed 2000; Narayan 2000). Another problematic repercussion gendering could have is the perception of the taboos as “natural” and, therefore, not of cultural significance (Delaney 1988). If we analyze menstruation as a natural, biological

process that most women of a certain age group experience every month, then we skirt the danger of overlooking the cultural meaning attached to the biological process.

I have been keenly aware of the challenges that accompany projects where the population being studied runs the risk of being exoticized, and I have paid heed to avoiding these preconceptions in all stages of the project, whether it is while framing questions or it is during the analysis phase. For instance, by handing the meaning-making baton over to women, throughout the interviewing process I offered women the opportunity to explain what the rituals surrounding the taboos meant for them, how their social environments were impacted by the changing nature of the rituals, and what they thought that signified for the future generations.

Framing the Research Question

In an effort to veer away from the oft chosen path of scholars in characterizing women's practices as taboos, the questions I asked reflected my familiarity with the rituals as commonplace occurrences, which while they limited women's activities around the house, were heralded by many women as a period of rest. While I paid consideration to the designation of the "period of rest" as a practice possibly enforced by the patriarchal structure, I devoted more attention to how women understand their roles as either the pyx or the spittoons of taboos. It was only through a thorough analysis of their narratives that the invisible influence of patriarchy came to the fore. This was an organic process that was not influenced by my personal biases or preconceived notions about the reaches of patriarchy in the perpetuation of the rituals. I further made a concerted effort to pose questions that tried to understand women's recognition of what the change or fixity of rituals meant for them rather than label the rituals as either disempowering women or enduing control in their hands.

At this point, it is important to ask what methods I used, how I framed my research question and how this framing reflected feminist ideals that I believe form the chassis of my research endeavor. Given the transient nature of women's menstrual cycles, it would have been a practical nightmare to try and be around women during their periods to conduct an ethnographic study in several countries. Conducting in-depth interviews was the most practical method that would help garner all the information in a limited time period in the given setting. While not without limitations given that qualitative interviewing runs the risk of selection bias and carries the dangers of the possibility of data appropriation to suit the researcher's existing beliefs (Sprague 2005), this approach allowed the participants to weave the conversation in whatever direction they chose. I chose a set of preliminary questions as a guide to initiate and ease the flow of conversation (Adler and Adler 1995). After the ice was broken, I let the respondents lead the conversation toward the direction they felt was important, allowing "them some control over the degree of exposure they felt comfortable with" (Dick 2006: 93). The questions that I had initially chosen went many rounds of change in trying to adjust for ease of understanding (respondents were confused when I asked who the primary decision maker in the family was), poor wording (which of the practices do you think should be enforced?), and basic clarity. This weeding process, I believe, brought me closer to the research questions and improved the transparency of the questions.

Power Imbalance, Reflexivity, and Situatedness

Given the often conflicting duality of roles as a woman of Nepalese descent and a researcher who was challenging, implicitly if not extrovertly, the performance of the rituals, I often found myself trying to strike a balanced position (Zavella 1996). I was aware of the intricate bind I had located myself in when seeking to look at the rituals as an active-member

researcher (Adler and Adler 1987) who frowned on the rituals on the one hand and also sought to ask questions without imposing her partisan ideas on the participants of the study. In order to tread lightly on this mass of dry hull, I made the participants aware that I was curious to understand the change from strong adherence of the rituals at the one end to insouciance, if not total disregard, for the rituals at the other end of the spectrum. This way, I was not resorting to deceptive means to draw information from them; at the same time, I was also not being disrespectful to the respondents who believed in the sanctity of the rituals and did not question the nature of the practices.

The imbalance of power that existed between the respondents and me (a researcher) was a factor that I could not ignore. For me to swoop into their lives and ask for research data, their time, and have no monetary compensation to offer in return was emblematic of the seeming power differential between the two parties. While they were in control of what they said and how they said it, I had the ultimate jurisdiction over how I wanted to present their narratives. Being cognizant of this gaping difference, I presented myself to them as a student researcher who needed *their* help in the completion of the study (my emphasis). I also made them aware that even though there was not much I could offer in return for their contribution, I would try to bring forth the issues regarding menstrual seclusion to the fore. This was my attempt to balance the power differential, a dimension of which would inevitably surface during the writing and the representing phase. This aspect of power discrepancy I tried to mitigate by offering them the opportunity to discuss the findings with me.

Another facet that I have had to deal with is the dilemma of reporting a negative portrait of the culture I belong to and I am studying, as I chance upon such a finding (see Islam 2007). This further complicates the relationship I have built with the respondents when I violate the

terms of my insider status by reporting the findings of the study as an outsider. One way I have solved this issue is by presenting my findings to a few of my respondents. This ascertained that even if they might not particularly agree with all of my analysis, I got an opportunity to explain to them my rationalizations and deception is, thus, partially avoided in the process. This has on many instances helped both groups arrive at a consensus. However, the process in its full-fledged application has been impractical given the wide dispersion of my respondents in two continents.

When I went about the interview process, many of the women showed surprise at the topic I was researching. The phenomenon I was seeking to understand was so much a part of their lives and existences that many had never given it much thought. When they were faced with the situation of having to answer questions about the nature of these practices, I often felt that they were both thinking and making sense of their practices as they were talking to me. For them to minimize the extent and nature of their practices hints that in some ways they were uncomfortable with the rigorous nature of the practices, yet they are not willing to let go off them completely because of fear of transgressing religious boundaries. Hence, they admit to adopting the simplest forms of the stringent rituals by simultaneously pointing out that the rituals in the rigorous forms were still practiced, though not in their totality. This way, they could still be looked upon as Hindu women who do not throw away their religious cloaks when progress and modernization knock at the door, but are modern women, too who are willing and capable of living and adapting to the changing times. I elaborate on this dilemma in the following section.

Asking Questions or Brewing Trouble?

I was aware that I was roiling sediments where, probably, none existed before my entrée into the field. This posed another ethical concern that was difficult to resolve. Should I as a feminist researcher be bold to ask questions to spark, if not bring about, social change? Or should

I, as a feminist, steer away from brewing trouble where none existed? While there was no easy answer to that, I would soon realize that menstrual management was a phenomenon the women were actively participating in with or without my presence in the field. I could certainly have helped bring this trend to the forefront, but I alone was not responsible for introducing a possibly problematic slag without the presence of molten metals in the first place.

Let me clarify this with an example. A surprising number of women in the study understood their menstruation practices as relaxed, so much so that when asked what they observed during menstruation they would respond by pointing out that they didn't do anything to fulfill their roles as menstruants. This came as a surprising fact to me; women in these many numbers could not be giving up the rituals in their entirety, I suspected. When I inquired about this further, I discovered that this was just a relative way of assessing their practices in comparison to women and girls whose rituals practice bordered on the rigorous side.

Deepti, a 48-year-old who resided in Nepal, elaborated that she had seen her neighbors take *nachune* a little too earnestly and therefore her version of the practices seemed like the observance of very little to her. Therefore, in perceiving herself as not doing anything she was comparing herself to her neighbors who perhaps reminded her of the stringency the rituals demanded to legitimize one's religious status or perhaps by using an extreme form of comparison she was highlighting the extent to which one could over indulge in a tradition when the norm, the genre she followed, called for less-stringent rituals.

Many women circumnavigated rules around the rituals to suit their social settings. Sangeeta, a stickler when it came to following rituals, provided an excellent example of how women construct rules that are similar to prescribed rules but are very different in significance. By sleeping on the same bed with her husband, she had convinced herself that as long as she

maintained physical segregation, sharing sleeping quarters would not equate to breaking ritual norms. And this method, she claims, makes her ritual so much more lenient than her mother-in-law's, whose still calls for occasionally barging into Sangeeta's bedroom when she has her period to monitor where her daughter-in-law is sleeping.

Thus, my questions brought to the forefront a phenomenon that already existed in muted forms. Deepthi's answers may have been spurred by my probing and her feedback could have been an upshot of justifying her rituals in front of a stranger. Sangeeta's honest revelation, though, showcased a practice she regularly partook in and was not forced into the narrative by my presence. As a researcher, this disclosure does not free me of blame of poking at the personal lives of these women. But given that the women showed interest in participating in the study and their involvement was voluntary, it does signify that the trend I am detecting and studying is "real," even if it constrained within the discourses of a localized reality available only in a certain time frame (See Jaggar 2007: 345), and tangible and warrants some interest from the academic community.

Analysis of Data

While coding the interview transcripts I came across similar themes time and again that pertained to how women were following the simplest form of rituals; the way the women framed the discourse, the rituals consisted of the bare minimum of what was actually expected. This surprised me. I had been raised among women who were orthodox in their practices, and I had seen similar practices being enforced in the society I grew up in. For women to say that they did not indulge in the rituals was unanticipated.

Even as I was transcribing, I began noticing that women, for whatever reason, perceived of their rituals as minimalist. Another trend that I caught notice of was that women altered

prescribed rituals to manage menstruation. The example of Sangeeta sleeping on the same bed as her husband and passing that off as physically isolating herself is clearly depicting of this form of management. Therefore, I gathered that an active process of conducting menstrual practices to suit the individual needs of the women was taking place in the lives of most women.

I am not only cognizant that my social position influences my approach to research and also the interpretation of the findings, but I thoroughly embrace it (Haraway 1988). The knowledge I am producing will be socially situated; hence, I believe, it is reasonable to assume that this situatedness is reflected not just in the production process but in the hidden processes and steps leading up to the cultivation of data. This calls for reflective practices, which is inclusive of accountability (Naples 2003). The term indicates both individual self-assessment and collective assessment of research strategies and therefore can be employed and implemented on various levels (Naples 2003). These range from being sensitive to the perspective of others, how we, as researchers, interact with respondents, and also acute awareness of the power dynamics in such encounters (Naples 2003). I have made an attempt to use reflective practices so as not to be hindered by the tedious process of “constant reflexivity,” which could make the respondent-researcher interaction strained and cumbersome (Hurtado 1999: 12).

For a practitioner eager to point fingers at patriarchy, the practice of management could be looked upon as limiting and constraining women who are acting within the boundaries of taboos imposed by a patriarchal structure. But the researcher in me knew the explanation was too simplistic. It took away the agency these women were deploying. More importantly it veiled the redefinition of the meanings of the taboos based on the collective notions, ideas, and beliefs that reflect the women’s positions not just as gendered bodies but as cultural figures who look to salvage what little is left of the untouched aspects of their culture. Thus, while analyzing the

findings I used my situatedness to understand the trend and refrained from rushing headlong to support a specious concept of incriminating patriarchy, which seemed attractive on the surface but was a deficient approach at the core.

A Feminist Study or a Study on Women?

This now brings us to the issue of looking at the research topic with a feminist lens. Is my topic a mere study on women conducted by a woman or is it a study that utilizes feminist ideals? My research project is a product of the social position that I occupy—a position from which I can only obtain a partial view of what is being studied (Gross 1986). This position heavily leans toward the idea that these menstrual practices not only hinder the day-to-day activities of women but of the entire families as well. More importantly, I bring with me the notion that the isolation period connotes a period of rest is idealistic at best and delusory at worst. The resting period, as many women reiterated, comes with a clause. For many, this “period of rest” still calls for their involvement in cleaning around the house and completing chores, and the stipulation that restricts women from being involved in many activities takes away from the idea of rest and gives more of a hint of curtailed freedom, an oxymoron in itself.

Women themselves are wary of the preposterous demands it makes on the very people these rituals are put in place to protect. As Rita so squarely suggests, “The practices make life uncomfortable for the very people it was supposed to protect: men. When men have to take up cooking out of compulsion, the practices demanded modification.” Hearing from these women in tacit and explicit ways what had always troubled me about the rituals was reaffirming and reasserting that some form of change toward “promoting gender justice and equality” was necessary (Jaggar 2007: vii). However, I also respect the heterogeneity of views women hold. As a feminist, I must not silence the views of those participants who view these practices as

empowering women. At the same time, I must pay attention to how women's positive appraisals might also be an indication of how the patriarchy functions by reinforcing its legitimacy by involving the subordinate group: in this case, the women (Florence 2013). This way I make an acknowledgement that women can be agents and objects concurrently as they utilize agency within constraining social boundaries (Jaggar 2007: 38).

As a feminist I do not have a pre-packaged potpourri that will dictate this change toward a more gender-just society (Jaggar 2007). I, however, am relieved that my questions are raising consciousness among women (Jaggar 2007). I am also delighted that many women themselves have conjured up ways of actuating change by managing menstruation rituals.

Another dimension of a feminist study is objectivity. Objectivity, in my opinion, calls for openness about my research process, my moral baggage, and my research questions. But I am also aware that absolute honesty might not be feasible and practical in the setting. Even as I am talking about my dislike for the rituals, I mute the degree of aversion I feel so as not to alienate my respondents with my extreme views, which they might now want to entertain. My objectivity calls for respect that I, as a researcher, owe to my respondents. I therefore utilize Haraway's (1988) description of situated knowledge—the form of feminist objectivity that takes into account the situated and embodied knowledge of all actors involved.

I have certainly been aware of the ethical dilemmas in the research setting. Who am I accountable to? Should the respondents have a voice in the analysis process? Among other ingredients, a feminist research practice requires reflective practices, respect for participants, and collaborative interactions among participants (Naples 2003). In addition, the task of a feminist researcher is not just to publish a piece after conducting research but to “cultivate audiences that can be moved to action by it” (Naples 2003: 100). It would be unethical for me to say that my

interest in the study is to understand the phenomenon and quietly retreat my footsteps to the academic cocoon. My social upbringing instilled in me the urgent need for the study, and the same social upbringing urges me to push for “change,” however miniscule that might be.

I am still in the process of understanding how my endeavor of promoting a gender-just Nepalese society will come into fruition and how change will be brought about. This chapter, while offering avenues for implementing such changes, also allows for a deep reflection on the possible flaws in the research methods that might have inadvertently crept in and the blemishes in the methodology that might not be apparent. A reflexive undertaking also creates awareness about the dilemmas that researchers deal with on a consistent basis and others that we render invisible. The exclusion of fillers in transcripts provides an example of how we are so immersed in the discourse of the dilemma of the power struggle between the researcher and the respondents that we forget or ignore the silencing of the respondents that is taking place when we exclude their voices in the form of fillers or appreciable pauses from their spoken transcripts (DeVault 1990). As such, in my transcripts, I have included the indicators of emotion like laughter and smirks, included fillers like “ummm,” taken into account what their pauses could indicate, thereby making known their narratives are being presented in as authentic a form as is truly possible.

Such an interrogation of one’s research methods and methodologies reemphasizes the importance of understanding the researcher’s positionality in the social milieu, the researcher’s stance when it comes to her understanding of her social position and the effect that has on the study, her position regarding objectivity, and finally how all of these ingredients make for a study that is “inclusive, objective, and just” (Jaggar 2007: 38).

CHAPTER III

UNDERSTANDING MENSTRUATION RITUALS

The diverse scholarship on the study of menstruation indicates that cultural observances of this phenomenon vary across the world (e.g., Buckley and Gottlieb 1988; Hoskins 2002). Despite these variations, the designation of the taboo nature of menstruation is quite consistent across cultures, times, and places. While not all cultures place a strenuous proscription around it, many cultures skirt around the issue by building a wall of silence (Dunnivant and Roberts 2012; Kissling 2006; Laws 1990). The United States is an easy example. U.S. society, while seemingly accepting of the biological aspect of menstruation, remains overall uncomfortable with having a discourse about it; hence, the advertisement depictions for “feminine products” are often awkward and typically depict how to “hide,” “cover,” or show ways to “forget” that one is menstruating (e.g., Kissling 2006). Put simply, the U.S. has built a ritual of silence around menstruation.

More traditional cultures espouse even more elaborate rituals to tackle this phenomenon that is enmeshed in frameworks of tradition, religion, and familial allegiance. The taboo nature of menstruation, therefore, receives more attention and more complex ritualistic treatment to offset the greater degree of harm and danger associated with the phenomenon itself (e.g., Guterman et al. 2008). Thus, the study of the rituals and the meanings women allocate to menstruation practices tells us a story about their historical significance, present-day influence, and indicates future practices and beliefs. This chapter lays the foundations in understanding the social meaning of menstruation rituals in the minds of a sample of women of Nepalese descent who live it, experience it, and tackle it in distinctly individualized manners.

Rituals and Ritualized Bodies

The study of rituals has garnered renewed popularity in the last four decades. Rituals have become a site for analysis not just to help explain socio-cultural phenomena but as an independent category of exploration (Bell 1992; Grimes 1995; Rappaport 1999). The daunting task of using ritual as a tool for analysis, even when it is deeply embedded in larger social discourses, began in the nineteenth century, when the term served to explain the differences between the European culture and other cultures and religion (Bell 1992: 14).

In current days, anthropologists use the term “ritual” as an essential accompaniment in the understanding of the dynamics of culture while religious studies scholars use ritual to expound on the existence of religious ideas. A sect of scholars also considers ritual as a mode to assure social solidarity in the community. For example, Durkheim (1963), Radcliffe-Brown (1964), and Malinowski (1948) viewed ritual as means by which individuals are brought together as a collective group. More recently, ritual is now studied in and for itself, in addition to being entrenched in the larger discourses of religion, culture, and society (Bell 1997:16). Rituals have often represented controlled environments where ordinary functions and practices have been transformed to produce exclusive, routine, habitual, patterned, obsessive, or mimetic actions and interactions (Bell 1992; Grimes 1995; Harvey 2005; Smith 1978).

In the last four decades, “the body” has also become a popular site for analysis. While the social body is “a highly restricted medium of expression” (Douglas 1973: 93), it can also function as a mold that organizes society (Goffman 1962). The body acts as a medium for the internalization and reconstruction of social values. The body also becomes a part of the structuring environment where the process of ritualization takes place by producing a ritualized body through the interaction of the body and the environment (Bell 1992: 98).

When considering the amalgamation of the body and the ritual with the subsequent internalization of bodily rituals as a gendered practice, it is implicit that a woman's lived experience often becomes the focus of research. Through the body is also disseminated the knowledge of how we as socialized beings "do gender" and in the process often reproduce hegemonic gender binaries (Westbrook and Kristen 2014; West and Zimmerman 1987). Many of the adopted and adapted rituals have their roots in gender-specific circumstances in patriarchal societies where the rituals centered on women's bodies, their life cycles, and their relationships with people around them. Over time, scholars steadfastly hold that women's bodily rituals produce subservient ritualized agents whose bodies are being disciplined and regulated (e.g., Bordo 1995; Foucault 1991; Vavrus and Gunn 2010). Even with well-liked and seemingly popular ritualized procedures and structures like pregnancy and motherhood, authors have noted the surveillance and control of women's bodies have been carried out in the name of the safety and security of the newly born and toddlers (Murphy and Rosenbaum 1999; Woliver 2008).

When performed corporately, ritualization includes elements of negotiation, construction, and orchestration between the performance and the performer that often empowers the performer as well as sets limits. The sect of scholars drawing upon the restriction of women's movements and activities during ritual activities as a signifier of their oppression and looks upon these very restrictions as the management and discipline of their ritualized bodies (see Bartky 1988; Bordo 1995).

The management and disciplining of the ritualized body, especially of women's ritualized bodies, results in, the production of docile bodies, a term Bordo borrows from Pierre Bourdieu (Bordo 1995:166). Bordo argues that this disciplining of the female body by way of isolation and seclusion in the name of purification does not allow much room for change in gender

configurations (166). The disciplinary action unwittingly reaffirms the external control exerted on women's bodies, thus resulting in the "symbolization and reproduction of gender" (Bordo 1995:168).

However, a feminist offshoot cautions labeling women's bodies as punished and pays closer attention to the demonization of the regulations posed on women's bodies (see Abu-Lughod 2002; Hartman and Mormon 2004). While concurring with the systemic and structural flaws of the patriarchal system, feminist scholars pursuing this angle also seek to question how women themselves live, experience, and understand these restrictions incumbent on them (Lambek 1992; Mahmood 2001). By drawing attention to the regulations and the meanings attributed to these regulations by the practitioners, many scholars attempt to underscore the interrelatedness of both rather than polarize them (e.g., Avishai 2008; Hartman and Mormon 2004). Analogous to this approach, I will take a closer look at women's use of vocabulary regarding terms such as "pollution" and "contamination" when describing their menstrual selves and seek to understand if the terms could offer multiple meanings given the context in which they are presented.

My approach in understanding menstrual practices among Nepalese women is not meant to be all inclusive of the rituals nuances surrounding menstruation, not in the Nepalese sub-culture nor in the menstrual cultures around the world. In fact, this project averts from identifying the "main" reason or the "major" explanation for menstrual taboos. Rather, I hope to gain an understanding of menstrual practices through the vocabulary and experiences of the Nepalese women who actively engage in them. Following this meaning-making approach that women embrace, I intend to decipher what makes the rituals in their harshest forms persist despite numerous efforts by the Nepalese government to outlaw them (2013).

Taboos

The study of rituals is often intricately linked with taboos. As has been discussed in the introductory chapter, the phenomenon of menstruation has been historically addressed by instituting regulatory measures often in the name of cleanliness, creating boundaries and restoring order. These regulatory measures take the shape of taboos inasmuch as they help reestablish order to a transitory situation of anomaly. The proposition of taboo being an anomaly and a deterrent to order in a system was first introduced and popularized by Mary Douglas (1966). Although Douglas has had her fair share of critics regarding her stance on taboo and pollution (e.g., Bergesen 1978; McCormack 1967), her interpretation of taboos has acquired strong roots.

The concept of taboo regarding menstruation can be better understood as such: The menstrual phase is ensconced between two temporal structures—the pre-menstrual phase and the post-menstrual phase—which are otherwise not anomalous and not generating disorder to the normal disposition of social processes (Dutton 2006). This liminal phase signifies a transitory phase between two orderly categories, yet does not fit snugly into either of those two categories. This transitory phase characterizing the taboo is often traversed with the help of rituals, which is “frequently invoked as an antidote to the presence or influence of the taboo” (Dutton 2006: 44). Rituals, in other words, help reconcile the disorder embodied by the taboo. They confront the disorder, they tackle the disorder, and they help advance the individual from a polluted phase to an unpolluted state. Rituals, therefore, are tactical tools that urge the liminal phase forward. They provide structure and reason to a phase that would otherwise have no constitution and would make the taboo period less of a window where order is sought but more of a chaotic interval where structure might not seem significant for the meaningful functioning of society.

The interrelated nature of taboos and rituals are also routinely hinged to the increasingly popular and often controversial concept of agency. In this current study, agency often becomes an essential apparatus that provides a nuanced approach to the understanding of menstruation rituals, ritual modification, and to a wider extent religiosity. With the latter postulation considered in the chapter five and a concise description of agency and its various manifestations examined in chapter one, the current chapter explores Nepalese women's adaptive undertaking of menstruation rituals and agency in their adherence to menstrual taboos (stringently or moderately), when the alternative option of abnegating them has become attainable in the current cultural climate. By paying careful attention to the discourses of women in Nepal and the Nepalese diaspora in Bhutan, India, the U.K. and the U.S.A who follow menstruation rituals stringently or modify the rituals to some or all extent, the findings exemplify the transformation of menstrual taboos over space and time. The following sections provide a brief background of the interpretation of the rituals as practiced by women of Nepalese origin to help impart a better understanding of the intricate configuration of menstrual taboos.

Understanding the Rituals

As varied as women's individualities and make-ups are, their personal understanding of their ritualized selves are even more varying. Many consider the practice of rituals important facets of their cultural identification; others perceive the ritual aspect of menstruation to be very closely tied to their religious identity; for yet others the taboos but define a mundane baritone that is their ritualistic lives—something that they plod through while their menses last and pay no heed to during the uncontaminated days of the cycle. These scenarios, as is discernible, provide only a very narrow glimpse of the range of associations women feel about their monthly cycles. In the richness of the possibilities, therefore, also lie the intricacies. How then do we pave a path

into understanding the myriad ways in which women make meaning of the rituals encompassing menstrual taboos? One expedient route that women themselves use time and again is typecasting their ritual following in three neatly sculpted possibilities. While they do not necessarily use the terms listed here, women routinely see themselves and others around them as falling into these categories: adherents, modifiers, and abnegators (for a similar rendition of identity categorization see Gerschick and Miller 1994).

The understanding of their ritual selves also requires an understanding of the women as menstrual selves, which accentuates the social roles women depict as menstruating individuals, the individual sentiment embodied by women during menstruation, and the subconscious understanding of the body as falling somewhere in the purity-pollution continuum. For example, a woman who is menstruating might carry herself a certain way when she is menstruating: The physical manifestation of the phenomenon also reminds the woman that she is menstruating and therefore bound by certain social standards. This is oftentimes dictated by an organic understanding of herself as occupying some level of impurity, which then reinforces the perfunctory manifestation of the physical self into the social milieu. As a result, she establishes boundaries of what she can do, where she can go and what she can eat. The outward manifestation of the menstrual self is fluid, guided by individual, social and political factors, the workings of which almost always occur at the subliminal level. Therefore, the categorization of themselves as being an adherent, a modifier or an abnegator and the acceptance of these typifications are simply elements of their menstrual selves.

Apart from the three categories listed above, another distinction that Nepalese women make in their understanding of menstruation rituals is by way of differentiating their respective menarche practices. This distinction is made by two groups that belong to the different camps are

the Brahmins and Chettris and the Newars. The variation in the menarche rituals provide two different avenues for the women to understand their roles as menstruating girls and women and also gain an understanding of the leverage these rituals grant them in a Hindu society.

Menarche and its Various Renderings in Understanding Menstruation Rituals

An element that helps women formulate the understanding of the significance of menstruation rituals and also the phenomenon in itself is the initiation rites girls undergo during or before their first menses. The rituals surrounding menarche, for most girls, either at that moment or retrospectively, served as an indication of their entry into womanhood. Despite the initiation rituals being harrowing for many of the participants in the study, most of them recalled the ceremony to be the phase when their status change became apparent (e.g., see Elson 2002). The universality of this recognition of change in status, however, occurred under two different circumstances: for the Brahmins and the Chettris there was a degree of fear attached to the ceremonial proceedings whereas for the Newars, the ceremony heralded hope and protection more than fear. The discussion below will make the reasons behind these pathways apparent.

The Newars are the indigenous inhabitants of the Kathmandu valley in Nepal (Gellner 105), and the ritual practice of *barha* denotes the confinement of Newari pre-pubescent girls as a part of a symbolic menarche rite that moderates the polluting aspects of menstruation throughout a Newar woman's life (Gellner 1991, Kunreuther 1994). The performative aspect of the ritual includes girls being confined in a room for a period of twelve days, away from contact with men and sunlight (a masculine symbol in the Hindu culture). This seclusion is meant to counteract the strong polluting powers that the girls will situationally possess during their monthly period throughout their menstruating lives.

The ascribed nature of the pollution demands the girls be pollutants situationally. This carries negative connotations for the Brahmans and Chettris (Hindu caste/ethnic groups) while being favorably perceived by the Newari group even when the rituals practiced by the Newari girls parallel the ones practiced by the Brahmin/Chettri girls. The symbolism and implication of isolation *before* the first menses in the case of Newari girls denote the redirecting of emphasis away from the contaminating powers of the menstruating women by having the ceremony before their first period (my emphasis). The timing of the ritual is crucial in understanding the difference in perception regarding the first isolation ritual between the two groups: The Newari ritual takes place before the first menses to temper the polluting aspects of menstruation throughout a Newari woman's life. For the Newari girls it is a festival they get to enjoy with fellow *barha* girls during the course of which they get presents from the elders in the family. The interpretation of the Newari ritual is that the practice takes place so that the Newari woman is not socially stigmatized during menstruation unlike her high caste Hindu counterpart. As depicted by Kunreuther (1994) and Bennett (1978), the Newari girls look upon the ceremony as a function of rite initiation that carry positive connotation while the Brahmin/Chettri girls often found the seclusion at the time of menarche fear inducing and confusing with regard to their newly acquired status as young women in society. The Brahmin/Chettri ritual, at the time of the first menses, stands to cleanse the girls of the impurity they embody at the time of menstruation. The sight of the menstrual blood for the first time and the confining ritual to mark the changed role of the girls in society because of it results in the ritual being perceived negatively by the Brahmin/Chettri girls (Bennett 1978). It is, thus, apparent that classifications like the ones presented in the section above carry more meaning when the social context under which they

operate are examined and analyzed rigorously to garner a fuller understanding of typologies and the rationale behind the typologies.

Shrita, a 26-year-old architect in Nepal, while explaining the Newar custom of *barha* elaborates on why the ritual is not considered an encumbrance but a welcome diversion from the monotony of daily life.

It was not that much secluded because we Newars have a ritual called *gufa* and that is done in age between 8-12 before this menstruation cycle happens as a precaution; it is a ritual you have to have this *gufa*. *gufa* means, it literally means cave in English and you have to be placed in a separate room for 12 days and during that time you cannot see any of the men even if it is your brother or your father and you cannot even see the sunlight. So if the room has windows then it is covered with papers, newspapers, curtains so no sunlight enters the room, and this ritual is done so that it is kind of ritual, I don't know why it is done. Supposedly you get married to sun, which is God of light, something like that. For 12 days, it is kind of fun it is not that torturous for the girl. It's also done in groups, you have sisters and then cousins and then you play games and cards and then dance and those sorts of things and your relatives come, female relatives come to visit you and then give you presents and food to eat and the 12th day there is a grand party for you, your wedding for the sun is done and so a party is thrown and your *gufa* is over. And now if you have menses you don't have to be secluded (*sic*) for 12 days.

When I asked her to expound on the significance of the custom and how she understood it, she replied:

Ummm, I think it was not that much explained, it's just a ritual that you have to follow and I was told that you were going to be married to the sun and I was like "aaahhhh" what the... [*faint laughter*]. I don't know. So, nothing much was explained, it is just a ritual that you have to follow. Being a little kid you don't question your parents obviously and you are like "Okay, it has to be done so it has to be done." You are just happy because you don't have to go to the school. [*Laughter*] That's it.

The Newari culture has created more room to understand and aid the psyche of a young girl who might not even understand what menstruation is when she is first initiated. Whether this is deliberate, it is difficult to tell but what can be surmised is that the custom of *gufa* gives more power to the Newari women: they will never be considered a widow (a group routinely discriminated against in the Hindu culture) given that they are married to the immortal Sun God,

and the ceremony itself conjures memories of fun and merriment. The Brahmins and the Chettris on the other hand, treat the first menses with apprehension. Many of the women pointed out that their first knowledge of the rituals associated with the taboos was during the first menses. Neither were they prepared for the physiological changes nor were they prepared for the psychological anguish that 12 days of isolation bequeathed on them. Suprava's humorous recounting of her first menses provides a comprehensive understanding of how Brahmin and Chettri girls are underprepared to face the tough 12 days of their isolation and how this period distresses them for varying lengths of time.

I was quite young then. I went and took a shower. I had to go to a birthday party and so I thought I should not tell anyone. But the blood letting continued so I went in front of my mother and pulled down my pants. She started to cry so I started to cry too. I sort of knew I had *nachune* but I wasn't certain and when I saw my mother cry I thought something was wrong. My father was getting transferred and we were leaving for Kathmandu the next day. That day I spent at my relatives' place. The next day I was leaving with my father and brother, the two people whom I was not supposed to look at and to add to it the sun was shining very brightly too. So my mother told me repeatedly to not look at my father and brother and the sun. She gave me this umbrella, which was supposed to cover me from everyone. [Laughs]. After we got to Kathmandu I went to a cousin's place and stayed there for the rest of the twelve-day period.

Many girls are aware of the customs surrounding menstruation. They have seen the women in the family observe them but the reality of the situation hits them only when they experience the segregation, a process that feels more like a quarantine because of the unclean aspect of the phenomenon. Not many of them receive any formal conversation about the why's and the how's of the biology of menstruation. The taboo aspect, however, is explained in great detail without any elucidation as to why they are being carried out. This leaves the girls to fathom the meanings of the rituals on their own, and not surprisingly, most of them end up harboring a self-reproach for being unclean, and hence, impure.

The differences in the two forms of menarche rituals, one would expect, would create two dissimilar understanding of menstruation rituals. However, given that the rituals after the menses are no different for either of the ethnic groups the positive message that the *barha* heralded gets lost, perhaps, in the secluded area where all the festivities are carried out. Once the menstruation cycle begins in its repetitive sequence and guides the women in adulthood, the same messages of being dirty, unclean and impure are strewn across the social settings where Newari girls and women reside. Thus the intent and purpose of the *barha* ceremony becomes diluted and holds but a nominal meaning that women speak of in theory but is irrelevant in actual practice.

Given the initiation rites start out in different forms but eventually congregate symbolically for the Brahmins and Chettris and the Newars, we will now examine if these initial distinctions are reproduced in any way in women's ritual practice in adulthood. The sections below shed light on the three categorical typifications, the rationales women use to designate themselves as belonging to one of these categories, and finally how these classificatory measures women use speak volumes about the changing boundaries of the rituals in their varying social milieu.

The Adherents, Modifiers and Abnegators

The self-explanatory nature of the terms used as classification categories is not meant to be indicative of the well-groomed, tidy explanations women provide in describing themselves. To the contrary, women use very complicated jargons to fit themselves into one of the above categories. Bandana provides a quintessential example.

I follow the practice for myself. God is there, I know. But more than God, the practice of *nachune* is for me. I want to be clean. I can also be a devout follower if I follow all the restrictions. So even though I cannot follow all the restrictive elements of the rituals, I do whatever is possible. I don't cook, I don't sleep with my husband, I don't visit temples.

The excerpt above shows the ambivalence Bandana feels about her stance with regard to the practice of rituals. While she feels she tries her best to follow all the restrictions, she leaves open the option that there could be restrictions she might inadvertently be breaking. She, however also asserts that she is more of a ritual practitioner than many of her “modern, areligious” friends and neighbors who have all but given up the rituals. Thus, while in her mind she may not be a stringent adherent—a role she holds in high esteem—she still categorically fulfills the role of an adherent. The categorization process is therefore based on the practice of rituals; if women indicate that they modify the rituals in even small capacities, they fall in the modifier category. Bandana’s uncertainty regarding the practices is based on a relative ideal that most women do not meet. By pointing out that she does what is possible, she leaves some room open for transgressions that could have inadvertently crept in her practice.

The ambivalence characterized by Bandana disappears when speaking to women who believe they are staunch practitioners. These women know what is expected of them and painstakingly fulfill their duties as a *nachune* during the four to seven days of their monthly cycle. The rituals for them carry a significant meaning in defining their purity by virtue of the various segregationist procedures, which help cleanse their polluted menstrual selves. Among the stringent adherents the language of being unclean and polluted arose frequently. This, while a common element among almost all participants, was attested to more by the stringent adherents. Their polluted selves reminded them clearly of their temporarily truncated duties and provisional statuses as religiously quarantined individuals; therefore, they spoke about being “unclean” and “dirty” more often than the others. Also common among them was the traditional norm of acclaiming that the rituals help them keep the wrath of God at bay. The posturing of religious reasons in the pursuit of rituals signified the uncertain domain of the power of the deities—no

one knew what verdict a faltered step would summon. Not surprisingly, religious rationales were at the forefront in their ardent desire to follow the rituals. On the opposite end of the spectrum, many women who had fully given up the rituals would often establish their dissatisfaction with the ambiguity that the rituals heralded. Among the women in this category, all but one woman identified their disenchantment with the inflexibility of women's rituals but the relative versatility of men's rituals. In other words, they expressed frustration over women's rituals remaining virtually unchanged over the centuries when men's rituals around cleanliness began receding and vanishing with the advent of bigger societies. In the sections that follow, I will provide an index of the different categories and the primary characteristics the women identified as requisites for or identifiers of belonging to each category.

The Adherents

Twenty-two women identified as adherents. With religious allegiance as their primary reason for being an adherent, most women in this group use religious explanations for adopting the rituals steadfastly. They make their fear of breaking tradition explicit and further point out the importance of their religious identity.

Strong religious alliance

One common element binding the women who identify as members of this group is their strong religious alliance as a primary factor for their loyalty to the rituals. Because they associate the rituals as a part of a religious ensemble, divorcing various units would be a sacrilege they dare not perpetrate. Purnima's account of the meaning of the rituals expounds on the significance of her religious identity.

My grandmother used to tell me that we are dirty during *nachune*. When I was little I did not understand what she meant. My mother looked clean during her period while the children looked more dirty, playing around than did my mother. When I had my first period, I understood. So the reason we don't go to temples, we don't engage in festive

rituals is because we are dirty. The temple is a clean place. It is a place where we go to pray to Gods who help us get rid of unclean thoughts, unclean acts, and unclean behaviors. If I am a Hindu then I have to be fully able to call myself a Hindu. Doing all these things to remember Gods but not the menstruation rituals, no, no, no, that is not right. Not for me, not for God.

Purnima's awareness of herself as a religious being is encompassed in the idea of being an all-in religious being. Partial rigor concerning her religious duties would mean that she is not true to herself and her religion. Given the significance of purity in her understanding of religion, the constant assertion of the import of cleanliness of the body and the cleanliness of the religious shrine all point to the deep enmeshment of the concept of purity and religiosity. An impure mind and body are not capable of being religious beings and thus the ponderous substantiation of purity on both young and old menstruating bodies alike is easily evidenced in local traditions all across Nepal. Ruma, a 36-year-old from Bhutan had a convoluted way of making sense of this embodied impurity.

So much dirt comes out of your body. If the body wanted it, it would keep it. That it is getting rid of it means that your body is temporarily impure. You definitely should not do anything related to God during that period. You can't go to the temples during that time.

Ruma further expounds on how a fetus would utilize the "dirt" if fertilization were to take place, but according to her this "matter" would have remained in the body were that to happen. She adds that the lack of shedding of the endometrium (the mucus membrane that lines the uterus) in the latter scenario changes its nature from impure to pure.

Clearly, Ruma has given this process much thought. She has come up with a vocabulary for understanding this complex process in a way that explains the dissonance between scientific explanations and religious ones. While on the one hand, science informs her that the menses signify the preparation for a possible future fertilization, on the other hand religion preaches to her that this preparatory stage is indeed sullied, her body is unclean, and she is not fit to perform

any religious act. This gap in understanding urges her to use the justification of her body as religiously impure given that her science classes have taught her that biologically that is untrue. The long historical reign of the former worldview gives it more credence and that is what Ruma embraces.

Women who follow the taboos in one form or another unanimously echo Ruma's perception of the menstruating body as embodying impurity. Jobina, a 48-year-old from Nepal and the most vocal of all respondents remarked,

There is all that junk coming out of your body, your body is definitely in an impure state. If according to the mythic stories, we are indeed getting rid of the sin of the death of a God, then we should look at the period as a way to cleanse ourselves. And if we believe this is a cleansing action, then we also have to admit that what is being cleansed is junk. Now, I am not going to risk taking that dirty body to a temple. I can stay away from a temple for four days, and I can gladly stay out of the kitchen for four days.

Though Jobina uses a counterfactual account of the mythical story behind the taboos by transposing the killed (A Brahmin) and the killer (God), she draws a logical conclusion from the account of the self as impure. And because she sees the "truth" in the impurity of menstrual fluids, she justifies the taboos that keep her away from areas of worship and the cooking area. This account serves to accentuate how religion is a cardinal hub that regulates how women view themselves as religious practitioners. When religion calls for purity, virtue, and morality to exhibit piety, then women's impure bodies are definitely momentary hindrances that demand that their devout selves take a hiatus. Therefore, the physical manifestation of the biological phenomenon is enveloped in religious patois to justify the execution of the taboos.

Role of women as educators

Another theme that was common in the discourse of the adherents was the process through which they had learned of the rituals and the import given to the rituals in their families.

Many of the women in this category had been born into very religious households or had a patriarch or matriarch who was highly religious.

*Hajurama*¹ was very strict about these things. I learned early on that it was important to her. There was even a, how do you say, a little bit of scare that was present as to what she would do if the rules were broken. From a young age I knew what we had to do during *nachune* even when I didn't know what it actually entailed. About the blood and all, I found out only through my friends. So she used to become very active around the kitchen when my mother had her period. I think, how do you say, she was happy to be the "woman of the kitchen" again. She would not let my mother go inside the kitchen. My mother ate outside, used her own plates and saucers. She even had her own scrub to do her dishes. There would also be a long process of drying the mattress my mother slept on and then cleaning the sheets thoroughly, I think my mother did them twice just to satisfy *hajurama*. I strictly follow most of the things *hajurama* taught me.

Bina, a 48-year-old from a small town in Nepal had a discerning grandmother for a teacher. She ensured that the rituals were upheld, and she painstakingly participated even in her old age to ascertain that the ritual script was followed. At her ripe age of eighty-five, Bina's grandmother posed a picture of authority that young Bina was ready to emulate. She subliminally gathered the importance of menstruation rituals and also discovered the displeasure it would incite in her grandmother were the rituals not properly adopted. Perhaps by way of fear or her reverence for tradition and authority, the rituals became a mainstay in her house. At forty-eight, Bina has two daughters aged 17 and 20. Both of them have been instructed of the do's and dont's of the procedures during *nachune* after they get married and begin living with their Nepalese in-laws. While Bina acknowledges that times have changed, she still expects her daughter to keep the tradition alive. As she concisely put it, "my life has been good because of this, why would they want to take the risk?"

The role of the educator for most adherents was played by the mother or the grandmother and less frequently an adult woman in their family. Given my father's active role in ensuring that

¹ *Hajurama* is a term for grandmother in Nepali

I followed my practices diligently, I was surprised to discover that women held sway in maintaining the longevity and the rigor of the rituals. Men had seemingly small roles, if at all, in carrying forward the tradition of the rituals. This also included the priests who would often come to women's homes to perform various religious rites. Drishti's remark about the involvement of her father in teaching her the rules of the rituals during her period elucidates this further.

I thought I was the only one whose father was always finding faults in how I did this or how I didn't do that. I mean I was a little girl. He was also a priest so that should say something. My mother was uneducated so my father took upon the duty to educate me. He would say, "rags not in public" "no stepping foot in the cowshed" "don't sit on the sofa." I was never allowed to sit on the sofa. My mother also was told all this, not just me. I would come home to tell on the mothers of my other friends who did not do this or that. I thought he would either change or make them do the same things I was made to do. At that time I hated doing all those things but now it makes sense. I am glad I learned it from a reliable person.

The women in the study were quick to remark that given women's exclusivity in experiencing biological function of menstruation, it was expected and therefore honored that men were visibly absent from the domain of educating and instructing young girls about their roles as new menstruants. Only a few participants mentioned men's involvement in the regulation of the rituals.

Influence of society

What might not come as much of a surprise is that geographical location played a crucial factor in women's role as adherents. Twelve of the 17 women from Nepal identified as adherents; none of the women in Nepal identified as abnegators. The culture of the society one lives in deeply influences one's way of living (Cochran 1999). When this culture dictates that practitioners of the rituals who constitute a majority of the population are morally superior than the non-practitioners, then the sheer numerical majority of Nepalese women as adherents is anticipated. In fact, I can assert with a fair amount of surety that the majority of women in Nepal

practice the rituals to a moderate degree. While my evidence outside of the scope of this study is but anecdotal, I realized in my interviews with the women in Nepal that these rituals are so implanted in the conventional culture that when I went about the interview process, many of the women showed surprise at the topic I was researching. The phenomenon I was seeking to understand was so much a part of their lives and existences that many had never given it much thought. When they were put to task about talking about the nature of these practices, they were forthcoming about how embedded they were in their religious, social, and cultural milieu.

Pallavi, a 33-year-old from a major city in Nepal, remarked:

We do them like we do any other thing. See, if Rekha from next door and Suhaasa from the house over did not do these, then I would start questioning these. But my mother did it until not very long ago [stopped after menopause], my neighbors do it, most women I know do it, so I do it too. It is similar to this. Brahmin men wear their *Janai*². It must be uncomfortable. Change it every time there is a religious occasion. Have to shower in it, sleep in it. Do they complain? Many of them who complain have given up wearing the thread, I am sure. So when women start to complain, then they will start avoiding *nachune* practices too. But until then, we will do it just like we eat in the morning and brush in the morning.

Pallavi's narrative is slightly variant from her counterparts' in that she deviates from providing religious rationales, a theme she briefly touches upon toward the end of her interview. She simply highlights how the rituals have endured because women in the nation have not felt uncomfortable enough to drop them. While her discourse underscores further and leaves unanswered why women's rituals more so than men's rituals persist, it also emphasizes that the social atmosphere impacts the residents' practices even when it involves very private practices like menstruation rituals.

Adherence after marriage

² *Janai*: A sacred thread worn by Brahmin and Chettri men during their initiation ceremony. The *Janai* must be worn everyday of their lives thereafter.

While most women who identified as adherents had been staunch practitioners from a young age, five women recalled how the rigor in their practices had increased once they were married and began living with the in-laws. Maya, a 48-year-old, recollected how she was never restricted from sitting anywhere in the presence of male members. This, however, changed once she was married. They now have allocated spots where the *nachune* sits, whoever that be in the family. She joked about how the spot was occupied all at once because they all menstruated at around the same time. When asked what she thought of the change, she remarked, “That was such a long time ago. This is what I am satisfied with. I told my mother to change her practices, too.”

Maya is not alone in welcoming this change from laxness to stringency. Smriti, a 41-year-old cardiologist at a leading hospital in the capital city of Nepal, proclaimed that she felt much better after she completed her menstrual duties in totality. This totality included not just having separate sleeping quarters from the husband but having separate rooms altogether. Though cognizant of the fact that not all families could afford to have that extra space available for menstruants, Smriti asserted that this provision allowed for there to be no temptation to break the rules or no risk of forgetting that one is menstruating. The totality also involved abstaining from peeling vegetables, touching uncooked food like rice and lentils, and feeding her 10-year-old son. She, of course, had a retinue of domestic helpers to carry out the chores. In fact, her presence in the kitchen was more to supervise than to actually participate in the cooking. She however maintained that even before she was married she had been diligent about the observance of the rituals.

Women’s reasoning for being staunch practitioners and their path toward becoming practitioners vary considerably but what remains constant in their narratives is the importance of

carrying out the practices for the sake of continuity, upholding their tradition and religious values, values, they are quick to point out, that make them different from those who “have given up the practices and have gone the western route” (Jobina, 48).

The Abnegators

Eight women in the sample established themselves as belonging to this category. This group of women, though numerically diminutive in this study, provides a foray into understanding the future of rituals. Because of an amalgamation of factors like modernization, globalization, and migration, menstruation taboos have steadily declined (Gaston 1992). Therefore, a thorough comprehension of women’s reasons for taking this stance can provide an outlook into why women have moved away from these time-honored traditions.

Change in perception

Eight of the 62 women, ranging in age from 21 to 35, I interviewed had given up all forms of rituals associated with menstruation. All eight of them reported a marked change in their perception of the menstrual practices in relation to purity during adulthood. While they express that they have perceived the taboos to be associated with ritual purity in the past, they now profess to look upon them as measures to ensure cleanliness and hygiene among menstruating women. In fact, Sabhu was very observant about this change in perception. With a facetious example in hand, she remarked, “I actually believed men would turn to stones if we touched them during our period. It was only after I moved to the U.S. and gave up these practices when it occurred to me that these taboos were in place to ensure the maintenance of hygiene standards.” This shift in argument helps form the ideology of the changed nature of the sacred, from a concern with ritual purity and fear of pollution (Douglas 1966:147) to a concern with hygiene. This also helps women understand that with the introduction of hygienic practices the

rituals no longer carry a purpose. With the availability of sanitary products and pain relieving medicines specifically designed for menstrual cramps and bloating to help manage the menstrual flow better, the abnegators claim that they no longer have to deal with stains, rags, and the pain that usually accompanied their menses. Therefore, their “pollutive” position has become greatly diminished. The justification, therefore, helps women discontinue the practice without much guilt and fear, emotions ordinarily associated with defying taboos.

Aarti, a young graduate just done with her graduate studies in India and now living with her parents in the U.K., spoke very passionately about how and when she realized the utter ignorance with which she and the rest of the women folk who followed the rituals were bombarded with language of fear. She spoke out quite forcibly.

It is so easy to dupe us, isn't it? To what end though? I mean, just tell us that if we don't wipe men's shit, we will be admonished, reprimanded, punished, berated by God. It is so easy to use big and harsh words and just see us crumble. The day I realized that every cultural norm had to be laced with the language of fear, I marveled at my naiveté. Don't go to the temples, or else...don't touch your father, or else...don't go near the food in the kitchen, or else...don't touch the plants, or else.... If anything sane came after the “all else” I would have been sold. But it was always some vague use of language hinting at the backlash that you would have to bear were you to go against the norms. If for once in my lifetime someone came and told me, “Aarti, don't go to the kitchen because your pants are stained. Go take a shower instead.” If someone, just this one time, told me, “Aarti, don't come into the kitchen because you must be hurting. Just rest,” and truly meant it, I would embrace these customs but until the language of fear adorns the rituals, count me out.

Aarti's compelling argument brings forth the question about women's easy acceptance of duties and responsibilities in the face of consequences they cannot verify. By drawing attention to the preposterous proposition that women would willingly help clean up after men relieved themselves if a fear clause were attached to the ignoring of the task, she actually compels us to revisit the various tasks women have been made to undertake over the centuries, all across the globe by manipulating the language of fear and legitimizing it with the use of disprovable claims.

For Punita, a 31-year-old psychiatrist living in London, this change in perception came about early in her adolescent life. Her numerous attempts to make these realizations known to members of her family though were met with insouciance. She poured her frustration about the nature of the taboos thusly:

Separating the person from the rest of the family, making sure that the whole world knows about your menstruation, I mean, it is a personal thing, a personal thing. The separation may have made sense 100 years ago, but not in today's world, you know. Sometimes it almost feels that you are being treated like a pet animal where you have a separate place to sit, separate plates, you know, you are treated like you have some sort of a communicable disease where you can't touch any of the members, the male members. You know, even the religious rituals, I don't know why women aren't allowed to do those religious rituals. If you are to follow the scriptures, we are told time and again that it is the Gods who made us. Then why would God disapprove of our menstruation? He made that too. It doesn't make any sense to me.

By throwing the spotlight on the faulty logic behind the rituals and the contradicting messages they carry, Punita questions their authenticity. This way she finds it easier to rationalize her disregard for the taboos.

A dissident or an atheist?

The women who have given up all menstruation rituals deny the stigma of being looked upon as iconoclasts among Hindu women by drawing on the experience of their roles as then-insiders-now-outsiders and pointing to the impracticality and discriminating nature of the practices. Punita draws our attention to the unfair nature of the taboos, which call for women to be the spittoons of the taboos for menstruating every month. To consider a phenomenon that is deemed the creation of God a rituals seems simply ludicrous to her. Thus, the rationales that the rituals are outdated, unjust, and anachronisms in today's world makes this group immune to the criticism of being dissenters.

Women in this group prefer not to disclose their decisions about not practicing *nachune* rituals to their families back home. Thus, when they go to Nepal to visit parents or relatives, they do not have to avert judgmental eyes or scrutinizing faces who are on alert to discern if they are “pure” or not to participate in the many festivities that are liberally interspersed all across the seasons. Gauri, a 26-year old single woman residing in the U.S., even came up with an ingenious idea of dealing with the issue. She told her family members that she was on birth control pills when she was visiting Nepal for three months. While her statement created quite a fuss when she first informed them about it (mostly about unfounded health concerns) no one bothered her about it from then on. No one could keep track of her cycle therefore it was easy for her to go “about my period in my merry way.” Women who decide to “go rogue” are perceived as peculiar non-believers who are attempting to imbibe the western style. While the stance of the modifiers is often justified even by the adherents, most women cannot comprehend the pluck or the utter insolence it takes to actually step foot in a temple when one is menstruating. Thus, the label of the atheist often gets stamped on the women seeking membership in this group. I must point out that not all women in this group identified as atheists. Those who were spiritually or religiously inclined never associated transgressing the turf of menstruation rituals as violating the rules of God. They simply felt that ritual practice did not supply the right spiritual worth to be close to their spiritual selves.

If we focus on the ethnic background of the abnegators to see if their experience with menarche rites had caused them to denounce the rituals, then we find that the abnegators are a heterogeneous mix and the initiation rites seem to have lost significance among the Newars. This group seems to have absorbed fully the menstruation culture of the Brahmins and the Chettris.

Location as a factor in new belief

Given the commonality among these non-practitioners that they all reside outside Nepal, an important question arises about how big a role opportunity and the social environment play in these women's decision to give up these practices. However, the small number of women in this category makes it hard to discern them with certainty. Would it be easy to "come out" as an abnegator in a country like Nepal where the watchful eye of your family is assessing your every move? Do women "pass" as practitioners when and if the situation so demands? While my study is lacking in participants who would better answer these questions, these do raise more important issues about the function of migration and globalization in changing the culture and the nature of rituals.

The Modifiers

The questions that the abnegators leave unanswered are provided partially by the modifiers. In my interviews with women of Nepalese descent outside Nepal, I noted that many of them had modified their menstrual rituals; I also noticed that they consistently provided explanations for having adopted these altered forms of rituals. By circumnavigating the rituals and practices related to menstruation, women rationalized that they were maximizing the utilization of time, assimilating or adapting to changing social milieu and the changing perception of modern society, and finally, introducing simplicity and efficiency into their lives and the lives of their family members. The examples that follow will elaborate on reasons cited by 32 women who fall under the modifier category for having modified the taboos.

Modified rituals offering ease in foreign lands

The opinion that decreased ritual observance is essential for the proper functioning of nuclear families provided the rationale for change for the majority of the respondents. While they assert that they had extended members of the family help them with chores around the house and

in the kitchen back in Nepal, once they moved elsewhere this support system was missing. What that meant was women were now obligated to follow the practices in a society where the culture was not favorable. Long and odd work hours ensured that their husbands would mostly be unable to help them cook. Among the modifiers who brought up the issue of their husbands' not being able to help, none hinted at the husbands' unwillingness to help with the domestic chores. They mostly emphasized that the family unit would stand to lose financially if the man of the house adjusted his work schedule around women's menstrual cycles. The social isolation factor ascertained that they could not rely upon their familial or friend circle to help with the duties inside the kitchen, and their own involvement in the work force in the food industry made sure that staying away from cooking and preparatory work in the kitchen would jeopardize their chance at advancement as well as in keeping their jobs.

Kavita, a 35-year-old, is one such worker who got her very first job in a cafeteria at a state university. Her job description entailed that she help the chef with preparation of scrambled eggs, and when she was relieved of that duty she was sent over to the burger stand to flip burgers. Initially she would take time off when she had her period because she did not want to contaminate the food. However, after the first two months she realized how it was not practical to use up all her paid vacation days during her period. What she said further shows the thought-process put into the hard decision she eventually had to make.

On one of the days I was staying home doing nothing in my apartment I told myself "No, Kavita, this is it. You can't live in a country that is so different from Nepal and expect it to be just like Nepal." Here people have different values. They worry more about work than about stupid *nachune*. *nachune* doesn't bring home the dollars, work does. So after discussing it with my husband I made food for people who came to the cafeteria. Slowly, I started making food for my children at home. My husband said nothing. Then I asked him if he would like me to cook for him too. He still said nothing. So now *nachune* means there are no puja bells in the house. Nothing more.

While the process laid out by Kavita seems simplistic, the time it took to convince herself and then her husband took about six months. These six months, she further points out, were difficult for her mentally. Although the months preceding the decision making phase were difficult in their own way when the husband had to come home from work and resume activities in the kitchen late at night, the mental agony that followed was even more wearisome. She was re-schooling herself on what is practical and what is not. Once she made peace with her decision, convincing her husband was another tough task—it was a one-sided affair with she making her case and he remaining tight-lipped about her choice of action. In the above excerpt when she points out that her husband said nothing, she meant it literally. He did not voice his opinion until much later, she recalls. At that moment he told her that he had been afraid as to who they were turning into and had been worried that they would soon begin to eat beef, an act prohibited in the Hindu culture. His silence was indicative of the fear the he had of becoming heathens by eating the meat of the very animal the Hindus worshipped. Once he realized that was not the path they were taking, he accepted the changes for what they were—needed adjustments in the lives of migrants.

Geographic location as a factor in modification

The residence of twenty-nine women in this category outside Nepal gives a clear indication that modification becomes easier if not necessary when living in societies where the rituals lose some of their import given the need to acclimate and acculturate oneself. Women routinely noted that the concept of doing away with some of the rituals would not have occurred to them had they the same support system with them outside Nepal. Alka notes that since there were fewer people observing her everyday actions, evading customs became fairly convenient, especially when she was living alone. She never visited the temples, she cooked for herself and

her friends some of whom were men, she also never inconvenienced herself with keeping track of days when she became “pure” for the cleansing shower and the cleaning of the bedding. After she got married, these habits stayed on. Her husband, being the “forward” individual that he was, did not concern himself too much about menstruation rituals even when he knew about what they entailed. With a thankful look on her face, Alka noted how difficult her life would be were she to go back to Nepal. Alka’s gratitude for not having to follow the rituals is certainly not recurrent among all the modifiers. Some women display sadness at not being able to follow rituals, others manifest helplessness, others still exhibit the desire to go back to the society that allowed room for their cultural observance. Whatever their difference, all modifiers offer strong rationales for their shift in ritual practice. While the common scholarly practice of debating about the validity of their rationales can certainly be carried out, it would take away from the women’s endeavors to carve a ritual niche for themselves in a social space that is markedly different from the one they were raised in. Therefore, it is essential to refocus our attention on what the modification process means for the individual woman rather than centering on the legitimacy of the claims women make for modifying the rituals.

Conclusion

The oft-practiced convention among scholars of dissecting subjects’ transcripts to the sparse skeletal remains helps understand the intent and motivation and hence explains the results of various practices. This also, however, runs the risk of over analysis. If we were to use the accounts offered by the women in this study as illustrations then it would be easy to analyze the rationale women offer for taking up or renouncing one form of ritual or another. We could further parse that down and anatomize the meaning of that sub-meaning and carry out the process to the very end until we got to the basest level of a meaning-making exercise.

Notwithstanding the utility of the exercise in unraveling nuances of menstruation taboos, a simple contemplation of the narratives of the women provides us with many more nuances about the phenomenon that is menstruation. The categorization process that women actively participate in that is discussed in this chapter reveals to us the importance of belonging to one category over the other and also of the understanding the women have about the changing nature of rituals and how they assimilate in this changing culture. As important as it is to understand why women provide rationales, it is also essential to understand what is pushing women to provide those rationales. When a researcher suddenly shows up at their doorstep to question them about a tradition that to them is as much a part of life as is sleeping and eating how do they explain this phenomenon to the researcher? They do so by expounding on the why, the when and the how. To the researcher the why always seems more appealing and garners a level of scrutiny that the how and the when never amass. In this process we, as researchers, tend to over focus on the justifications, the excuses and rationales in understanding agency and take little notice of their agentival capacities that women showcase in much subtler ways.

Another dimension that this chapter highlights is the surprising similarity of menstruation rituals between two different ethnic groups that marked menstruation very differently in the initiation stage. The early distinctions of the menarche rites and the subsequent diminishing of these distinctions, therefore, function as a barometer in indicating the socio-political strength of the Brahmin-Chettri sub-group. This symbolic strength is also substantiated by the sheer numerical dominance of the Brahmin representation in politics, in the work force, and in the religious domain (Dixit 2001). It is no surprise that their overwhelming majority influences public policies. But the intricacies of the menarche rituals hint at the undervaluing of ritual behavior that actually serves to protect women. This trend, while probably incidental and not

calculated, again intimates at the powerful influence of patriarchal forces that glorify the ritual behavior of the priestly class while diminishing the worth of ritual practice of another ethnic group, the Newars, which while financially robust, has little socio-political influence in impacting ritual practice.

In addition to the influence of menarche rituals, this chapter provides an overview of how women understand the menstrual phenomenon, what the changing nature of menstruation rituals signify to them, how they ground themselves in this changing culture, how they hold their religious identity that is strongly linked to their menstrual identity intact, and how they understand the rituals even when they are renouncing their practice steadily. These processes are different for different individuals but the procedure each woman undergoes in situating herself in her social surroundings and deciphering for herself what ritual is “right” for her and what rituals she cannot observe anymore is a deliberate, calculated tread that helps her orchestrate the social apparatus to fit the settings of her individualized social domain. This process will be brought to light in the next chapter on adaptive religiosity that outlines how women’s understanding of their menstrual identity is tied very closely to their religious identity and how they embed one in the other to provide a harmonious synchrony.

Chapter IV

RITUAL PURITY AND POLLUTION

The religious female body has always remained at the forefront of scholarly analysis for purposes as varied as scrutinizing the subjugation of women, vivisectioning the agency these “subjugated” women wield, analyzing religious womanhood and its changing façade, to examining locally assumed perception of gender roles. As such, scholastic analysis of the ritual female body has gained increasing popularity in the last few decades. The dominant scholarly narrative interprets women’s ritual bodies as regulated, disciplined and, hence, subjugated. Scholars embracing this school of thought steadfastly hold that this process leads in the production of subservient ritualized agents (Bartky 1988; Bordo 1995; Foucault 1991; Vavrus and Gunn 2010). In contrast to these scholars, a growing number of scholars are able to dissect the display of agency in women’s ritual pursuits thereby hinting that looking singularly at women’s acceptance as an indication of subservience is too simplistic a lens to understand women’s roles (Avishai 2008; Hartman and Mormon 2004). Amidst the scholastic rigor of understanding women’s ritual bodies, this study looks to identify the different meanings various ritual practices hold for religious practitioners. By chronicling the change in rituals among practitioners, in this chapter I will verify the fluid process by which the practitioners play a powerful role in helping oscillate the very definitions of ritual purity and ritual impurity with very little desecration to the foundation of these two phenomena.

Rituals for religious practitioners of various faiths convey different meanings. For some, rituals strengthen their religious identity. The bolstering of this identity becomes important to these practitioners as this makes their religious selfhood legitimate. Rituals have historically been essential for producing disciplined bodies, and many practitioners are grateful for the

existence of the rituals, which make their religiosity regulated and, hence, easy to follow. The repetitiveness that is characteristic of rituals, thus, is appealing to them. Rituals also provide an easy canopy to evade interrogation of contradicting and oftentimes hypocritical gendered roles as spelled out in religious scriptures; when we unpack this phenomenon with respect to menstruation, we can comprehend why a set of practices, designated just for women for a sin committed by a heavenly being that then precludes them from maintaining contact with Gods, becomes not just acceptable but also routinized for centuries for the simple reason that it falls under the auspices of religious ritual behavior. This also explains why certain rituals of supposed import become more sought-after thereby symbolizing their significance in comparison to those that go out of fashion. Rituals therefore become a powerful tool of analysis in illuminating how women as religious actors understand themselves as ritualized beings amidst the multiplicity of ways society expects them to portray themselves.

One such area where women's religious bodies are highly monitored is in the regulation of sexuality at the heart of which lies the surveillance of the menstrual body. The rituals related to the purity and impurity of this fertile body often becomes the site of dissection in assessing the moral rectitude of women and also the society they live in. The striking strain between the onus of managing a reproductive, and hence impure body and that of achieving religious purity while living a non-monastic life pushes women to adapt the fairly routinized menstruation rituals to suit the needs of their individual social landscape.

Another major theme that is omnipresent in the field of menstruation studies is the understanding and averting of stigma related to menstrual taboos. Depiction of menstruating women as stigmatized has been a common practice among scholars who have studied cultures where the stigmatization was palpable (Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 2013; Lee 2009). Even in

cultures where this perception is not apparent, however, scholars have taken liberty to insinuate (e.g., in Buckley and Gottlieb 1988) the unclean nature of the menstrual fluids thereby concluding that menstrual seclusion as a way of dealing with the taboo nature of menstruation. Bearing in mind that menstruation as a physiological phenomenon and a ritualized process does not unfailingly denote its taboo nature or its stigmatized capacity, the comprehension of stigma with regard to menstruation taboos in the Nepalese context necessitates a deeper understanding of the concepts of purity and pollution. The sections below expound on purity and pollution as defining postulates in how women understand their incorporeal selves during menstruation and the physical manifestation of menstruation in their corporeal selves.

Purity and Pollution

Since the publication of the seminal work by Mary Douglas titled *Purity and Danger*, many attempts have been made to glimmer light on the concepts of purity and pollution. While situated at the two ends of the spectrum, always jostling to remain at their ends, purity and pollution help shape the other's meaning, a trend that is not unorthodox for opposing elements. Both not only help define the other but also accentuate that one cannot exist without the other. In other words, the presence of purity symbolizes the absence of pollution and vice versa. Therefore, the discourse about these two strong opposing elements often results in surprisingly blurry boundaries on what comprises one and not the other.

This chapter wrestles with this intricate argument by looking at how women of Nepalese origin through their menstruation ritual practices embrace the notion of purity by eschewing the idea of pollution and in that process redefine the very meanings of purity and pollution. Notwithstanding the fact that the meanings of these terms have always been fluid in different eras and varying societies, the scholarship about purity and pollution has rarely addressed how

through this redefinition, the fabric and framework of these elements have remained steady over the years. This can be clarified with an example. In many societies menstruation rituals call for menstrual bodies to be isolated from “pure” areas such as the idol area, temples, the kitchen, any religious sanctuary and the like. This demarcation of “pure” in turn underscores the impure—the menstrual body laden with menstrual contaminants. Over the years, the purity of the kitchen has undergone a transformation, as women who are menstruating regularly enter the kitchen to participate in chores if not to cook. This translates to an understanding among the members of the society as the menstruant body not carrying as much polluting power in a kitchen as it would in a house of God and/or the hallowed space of the kitchen having its significance diluted over the years. Therefore, by changing the definition of purity, the practitioners also alter the interpretation of pollution in that context. Perhaps because of these flexible boundaries the core concepts of purity and pollution get to live on.

Purity in the Hindu Context

There is no denying that what constitutes pure and impure within any cultural context is largely defined broadly for entire communities. The demarcation of the pure and the polluted become more precise as it travels down the population chain from larger communities, to smaller villages, to even smaller family units, and finally to the individual who then exhibits individualized configurations of the pure/impure composite. In the Hindu context, purity comes in two principal vintages: bodily purity, which expands beyond the cleanliness facet into the realm of ritualistic behavior and its meanings, and the purity of the mind. While the partial adoption of one type definitely helps in the attainment of the other, the realization of a fully pure individual cannot be achieved without fully embracing both forms of purity. Given the visibility of bodily purity over its counterpart, however, the pathway to corporeal purity is often seen as a

trajectory toward mastering moral and spiritual purity (see Saraf 1969). Thus, one form comes to demand more regulation in the quest for an all-encompassing composite of purity.

The historically favored notion of purity exhibited by one's external bodily actions still allows room for practitioners to adopt purifying measures by way of purifying the mind. While pure deeds and unalloyed acts still highlight the presence of virtue and morality in the religious sphere, the self-same virtue and morality can also be sought for by purifying the mind. In other words, if your intentions are pure, the deficiency of pure actions does not automatically render you polluted. This phenomenon, while common mostly among ascetics, is also appropriated by people fully involved in community life as is explicated clearly by 31-year-old Sarita in the following account:

My current lifestyle does not allow me to follow all prohibitions around *nachune*. My mind, however, helps me steer clear of impure thoughts and is always focused on God. So even when my body is dirty, my mind is pure. So even when I have *nachune*, I can internally pray to God and purify myself.

Purity for Sarita is not just a way of life but also a manifestation of thought. Therefore, by holding sway over where her thoughts wander, she believes her purity of consciousness trumps the impurity her body embodies.

The Hindu notion of purity is also linked very strongly to the concepts of *karma* (action) and re-birth (Saraf 1969). As the cycle of the continuity of life in the Hindu context is regarded very highly, the concepts of karma and rebirth become affixed with ritualistic behaviors that help attain both the internal and external variety of purity. Therefore, by demarcating virtues and conduct that delineate the pure, societies also successfully lay boundaries that guide seekers of purity toward categorically repudiating certain behavior. Therefore, societies ascribe everyday elements like water, fire, touch, sex, etc. with the potential to purify and pollute (Singer and Cohn 1968). These purifying and polluting powers become even more enhanced when these

everyday elements are associated with people belonging to higher castes (See Vail 2002). These groups, therefore, are more susceptible to being polluted due to their higher purity status, “with purity said to be weaker and more static than pollution” (Vail 2002; 377). This can be attested to in the Nepalese caste division with the Brahmins and the Chettris carrying the onus to take upon more stringent forms of all purifying rituals including menstruation rituals to suppress the influence of various pollutants.

Pollution in the Hindu context

A range of options is available on the pollution continuum in the Hindu context as spelled out in the Hindu customary law text *Dharmashastra* and the *Upanishads*: The human body is considered naturally dirty at the one end of the continuum and the human body can be cleansed or sullied depending on what the external body and the internal mind come into contact with on a day to day basis (Vail 2002). This spread allows for pollution to be understood and avoided in individual ways; the broad meaning of the polluting powers of certain material or thought are therefore considered mere guidelines in how to personalize one’s rituals around the attainment of purity.

Three varieties of ritual pollution—kin pollution, material pollution, and bodily pollution—encompass the range of pollution that could transform the pure body into the impure (Saraf 1969). Among these, kin pollution is caused by birth and death in the family and impacts agnates and cognates; material pollution is brought about by human interaction with certain substances. Both these forms ultimately impact the body in that the pollution comes to be exhibited through the body. Bodily pollution is emanated from bodily excrements or from proximity or contact with such emissions; The ensuing polluted state lasts in strength and duration depending on the pollution power consigned to the excrement. For example, menstrual

fluid commands more defiling power than feces. Thus to combat these various levels of pollutants, purity laws and rituals become an essential part of a religious or cultural tradition. By reverting the polluted state of the body to a pure state, purity rituals help maintain a physical manifestation of cleanliness and also help restore a relative form of ritual morality (Preston and Ritter 2012).

Purity and pollution, though diametrically opposed theoretically, are tied very closely together. The presence of pollution in whatever manifestation demands rituals that restore purity to the individual and, thus as an extension, to society as well. Purity denotes the marked absence of pollution and perhaps also the presence of rituals that keep pollution at bay. Thus, the changing forms of purity and pollution are important indicators of how the landscape of purity rituals are transforming and what the transformation heralds for the parent concepts of purity and pollution. The changing landscape also underscores, albeit tangentially, the weakness of understanding menstruation taboos as indicators of stigma in the Nepalese context. In fact, the discussion below will impart a better comprehension of why menstruation rituals further complicate the understanding of stigma and in the process render a deeper breadth to the study of the purity pollution continuum.

Purity and Pollution in the Context of Menstruation

Menstrual practitioners are both blamed for being a vessel of impurity, thereby demanding periodic isolation and cleansing, while also being elevated for their level of commitment at attaining purity not just for themselves but for their households and hence their communities. Menstruation taboos remain a trope for the pollution archetype in that they measure and shape the chasm between purity and impurity while also providing avenues for the closing gap between purity and pollution to remain virtually unnoticed. While technically

speaking, the indicators of what constitute purity and pollution have become blurry in their demarcating boundaries with the increasing dismissal and transformation of purity rituals, the blurry boundaries do little to shake the core of the two phenomena because even though the impure is not as impure any more and the pure is diluted with pollutants, the reconciliation of purity and impurity that occurs by tweaking the intricate details of the “how to” of the rituals leave the core of the phenomena unchanged.

Let us now examine how this occurs with menstrual pollution. Over the course of centuries, the rituals commonly associated with menstruation have transformed. The transformations in their individualized forms are slight as well as significant. Given what the law books and religious texts lay out for us regarding historical performance guidelines during menstruation, we are aware that menstruants today enjoy more freedom of movement inside various corners of the house. The trip to the kitchen, historically a proscribed action, is now a commonplace occurrence. While many women routinely participate in activities related to cooking, others vociferously condemn these actions. The stringent enforcements around taboos such as menstruation as described by Douglas (1966) are, in fact, moderated by individual and collective negotiations. For instance, many women while cognizant of the four-day rule for observing menstrual seclusion deem the period ineffectual in ridding oneself of impurity when the menstruant experiences excessive bleeding during her menses. Others consider the four-day period to be an adequate duration in combatting any level of impurity one might exhibit during the menses. Thus the prohibition around pollution is negotiated both individually and collectively thereby allowing for an accommodating and versatile definition of pollution.

Changing Boundaries of Purity and Pollution

Scholars often associate the changing nature of purity rituals to the stipulation of pure spaces by practitioners and remark how practitioners redefine “spaces and time that should be kept pollution-free” (Narasimhan 2011: 243). Not limiting this redefinition process to just spaces and time, I would further add that practitioners by way of redefining space and time are also redefining the very concepts of purity and pollution. In fact, by looking at the changes in menstruation rituals and simply offering that practitioners are defining spaces, we are engaging in the fragmentation of a narrative. Simply put, this exercise is disregarding the changing landscape of purity and pollution interpretation because by way of redefining spaces the practitioners are also redefining what constitutes purity and what is equivalent to pollution. The scenarios below will provide experiential evidence that explain the circumstances under which the changes in constitution of the two phenomena occur.

Pure spaces, impure bodies

Women engage in numerous negotiation tactics in creating a favorable environment for practicing menstruation rituals without disrupting their general, everyday routine. For those women who have their houses adorned with pictures, idols and other paraphernalia for honoring Gods and Goddesses, regarding these otherwise neutral spaces as holy would mean having to carry their menstrual selves around the house very carefully. Therefore, for many just the *puja* area, an area that is dedicated to the worship and honor of Gods, becomes a taboo space. If this room sees regular traffic or is in a dedicated corner of the kitchen, however, women refrain from going near the corner or abstain from touching the paraphernalia allocated to the *puja* area. While women are heavily invested in redefining the pure spaces as depicted in the example, by doing so they also redefine what the new pure is and as a consequence what the new form of pollution looks like. This arrangement is also regularly negotiated in the kitchen area. If we

remind ourselves of the sacerdotal teachings, the kitchen was an area that was off limits to menstruants; this has clearly changed in contemporary times. With great variation in the understanding of what areas of the kitchen is open for contact, women draft their individual *vaastu* flow that will ensure their presence in the kitchen while others in the family take over their usual duties. The hallowed area where the actual cooking occurs is off limits to many when the cooking routine begins. Many clean the area after the meal preparation is complete if no cooked items are in the vicinity. Others clean the area and even touch spice containers and bottles of oil with the understanding that their pollution powers can be minimized or eliminated with the cooking process, the capacity of the fire warding off pollutants being vital in this sanctioning process (Bentor 2000).

Even the eating routine comes in so many permutations and combinations. Deepti allows herself to sit on the dining table when no cooked items are on the table; Sasha places her plate on the dining table while her husband is eating provided the food is not laid out on the table buffet style; Asmita has her own stool and make-shift table that serves as her eating area; Suprava, while at her parents' place, does not seem to worry about contamination when her dining plate is in close contact to all other serving dishes as long as she does not serve from the dishes herself; with no concern for contamination laws, Punita serves all the food, eats at the table, and cooks her meals. Deepmala, a 34-year-old residing in a large town in Nepal, illustrated the constant alteration that accompanied her understanding of pure spaces and thus also of the purity score allotted to her body.

See when I was 12, I had my first period. I did the whole routine: I stayed in a dark room, I came out only at night, I missed school, and after that because "I was a woman" according to my mother, I stopped playing with boys. When my stepsister had her first period many, many years later she was only told to not go to the kitchen. She would go to the T.V. room, not just sit in the same room with my father but also talk to him. That was my first comparison basis. Then I got married. I left my home, had to adjust my whole

routine around my husband's family's needs, and even started to sleep on the floor on a paper-thin mattress because that is what my mother-in-law wanted. I had designated bed sheets for the *nachune* bedding. [Laughs]. Then my sister-in-law gets married, moves to her husband's home and sleeps on the same bed as her husband. She even gets to eat at the dining table with everyone else. And that is not it. After my husband got transferred to Birathnagar, the two of us moved to the new place, new rules again. This time, we had two separate beds. I ate at the dining table and he cooked some unpleasant meals. Now, I did all of these things with good intent. I believe that a level of cleanliness and also isolation needs to be maintained. But our knowledge of what is clean, pure varies from one home to another, no not just that, from one individual to another. At this stage I don't even know whom or what I am polluting.

These numerous examples provide substantiation of the redrafting that occurs in how meanings are designated to different spaces. In the same process we can also witness the redrafting of purity laws. What used to be considered forbidden is now slowly being authorized—women are entering spaces that were earlier deemed holy. This also means pollution in its historical import is losing its stronghold and, like the spaces and bodies that are symbolisms for it, is undergoing steady modifications.

Impure bodies, impure actions

Not uncommon in these social spheres is the regulation of bodies around menstruation. In fact, bodies are the one element that are supervised and monitored the most, perhaps because bodies are also the one element that we humans have the most control over. Elements like fire, earth, and the wind that carry cleansing powers are beyond the sway of human will. Therefore, bodies and more specifically women's bodies often become the fulcrum of control and regulation. While this does not deny the subversion of women's desires, it also does not completely take away women's ability to change or ignore customs within the boundaries of the social constraints. Women are seen doing so routinely, whether it be by refining the restrictions of which men they are expected to avoid contact with or reshaping how they interpret what contact means to them. To illustrate the former, we can turn to Geeta's narrative.

My son is four and he is still a part of me. I feed him and he sleeps with me. I cannot have someone else do that. Other men outside of my family also don't get any special treatment. When you take public transportation, you are bound to touch men. And, men accidentally touch you too because they don't know you are *nachune*. My father-in-law, my brother-in-law, and my husband, I don't cook for them, I don't touch them.

While the commonly honored rule pertaining to the feeding of or being in contact with boys is dictated by whether the boy has had his initiation ceremony or not, this again is a precept open to interpretation. Some women cook for boys based on whether they look like a boy in contrast to a man. In the scenario above, by drawing a distinction between men who are related to her and those who are not, Geeta has created her own personalized confines as to whom the rituals accommodate and whom they exclude.

In contrast, Niva synthesizes the meaning of "contact" to encompass a much broader conceptualization. She uncomfortably suggests that what the forebears were trying to do with the restrictions placed on women with reference to avoiding contact with men is offer women the time to rest and not be concerned with men's vigorous sexual energy during a time when women are not necessarily at their optimum strength. Therefore, "contact" to her stands for sexual intercourse and not simply the external variety of touching that takes place accidentally when strangers run into each other and more deliberately when it involves interaction with friends, relatives, and acquaintances. She justifies sleeping with her husband during her menses and even maintaining physical contact with him as long as they both refrain from sexual intimacy for the four-day period. For many women, sexual intercourse, therefore has become the boundary that differentiates the polluting nature of a menstruating woman's touch from the benign contact of a woman who happens to be menstruating.

A slight variation in the meaning-making exercise can be seen as Anima grapples with the same issue. She sleeps with her husband during her period but places a pillow in between so

that physical contact is averted. When reminded of the situation that accidental contacts could occur in the course of the night, Anima countered with the logical explanation that those sorts of contact were not deliberate and hence would not put the husband's health in peril.

As can be surmised from the above narratives, the understanding of impurity of a menstruating body is peppered with gradations that range from the body being considered impure just for the purposes of sexual intercourse to the body having polluting powers when placed in contact with men. Given that in the Hindu religion men are seen as stand-ins for God, the cautionary steps women take to avoid contact, whether physical or sexual, with men during menstruation reveal the underlying fear of their menstruation bodies polluting the sacred—God. These same bodies are defined differently when the direct object of contact is substituted to God. The menstruating body is regarded as highly impure when in the vicinity of temples and prayer areas; the self same body, however, holds relatively less polluting powers when placed in kitchens, near men and near plants. While it is essential to note that the level at which women consider themselves to have polluting powers in relation to the various contact objects mentioned above varies, what does remain fairly constant is that women practice isolation stringently around areas demarcated for Gods. The degree of variability is instituted when the object of contact are men, plants, or spaces that are considered sacrosanct, an excellent example of this being the kitchen. What this practice bolsters is that women's acceptance of the impurity level for being involved in various tasks has expanded; entering the kitchen, an act prohibited in the past, is now an activity that a menstruating body is uncontaminated enough to engage in as a customary undertaking; cooking while menstruating while not widely accepted has also slowly become routine among women living in the U.K. and the U.S.; trespassing the taboo around touching men has become the quotidian bolstered by the belief that better hygienic methods of

regulating the physical aspects of menstruation has rendered women less polluted. The last-mentioned aspect of menstruation changing from a concern with impurity to an appeal of hygiene has helped bring about an organically driven metamorphosis of pollution rituals.

From impurity to sexual prohibition to hygiene concerns

Given the context in which the rituals have been outlined in various religious texts, it becomes interesting to document how the rituals are interpreted and, in turn, carried out in different socio-political settings. It has been established that the Hindu tradition calls upon men to maintain isolation practices. Given the harm that is said to befall men for having sexual contact with menstruating women—loss of energy, decreased wisdom, loss of sight and so on in the Hindu community—it is interesting to note that women carry a considerable burden of maintaining segregation for the convenience of men in society. This responsibility comes with the understanding of the pollutive aspects of women's bodies. They look upon their bodies as dirty: Many point to the evidence of menstruation fluids to corroborate the fact. Therefore, the onus to segregate themselves from pure beings, pure spaces, and pure things is readily undertaken by most women.

The knowledge of impurity is also accompanied by the regulation of sexual conduct: married couples are made to desist sexual intimacies. The period of sexual isolation, in the Hindu context, is relatively shorter—four days compared to the longer seven days in the Judaic tradition (Biale 1995). Sexual prohibition is understood by many women to be designed for the welfare of the women. Rashmi, a shy 45-year-old resident of India, pointed out that

Doing that is not possible during your period. I feel sick and dirty. I can't imagine doing it. I just want to rest then, it is a period of rest for us women. And when I can't lift my own mattress, how can I do other things? This is a time for women to gain their strength back, they have to eat meat, drink milk, and gain strength to be able to do everything in the house and outside again.

This account was almost universally acclaimed by the participants of the study. While not many mentioned that the perception of their bodies as unclean led to this decision, almost all women who were comfortable enough to speak about sexual intimacy reiterated that this was a period of rest for women and, therefore, they should not be involved in sexual contact of any variety.

As is perceptible, in the Hindu tradition, the rituals are limited to the private sphere: with limited knowledge about the rituals being transferred from the priests to women; men's restricted involvement (or none at all) in the reinforcement of rituals, some form of rituals have become mere symbols of customs of the yore. In fact, in my interviews with women of Nepalese origin, most women were unaware of the origins of the taboos. Dhara, a 34-year-old from a big city in Nepal reiterated the thoughts that many of the interviewees of her age group expressed. "I don't know how the rituals came to be. My grandmother taught my mother, and I learned about them from my mother. I follow them because I was told that as a Hindu woman I had to do them. It is almost like a custom." It is apparent from her narrative that the rituals serve more as a tradition that has been carried out by her mother, her grandmother, and her ancestors. The absence of men in the regulation of the rituals is also explicitly brought out in the conversations with the women. Maya elaborates, "It was always my mother who taught me what to do, or rather what not to do. My father was least bothered. The men never ever speak about it. It is all hush-hush." Men's lack of involvement is further evidenced by the reticence of priests regarding women's duties as a menstruant. This substantiates what many women claim is the private nature of the rituals—devised by women for women. This position arguably also reinvigorates the patriarchal machinery, which seeks to gain from women's perception of their sole involvement in ritual regulation.

In the Hindu tradition the change in the rituals has not been heralded by any particular historical event or any shift of religious power. The law books and religious texts still prescribe ritualistic behavior to combat the effects of menstrual pollution. According to the texts, the menstruant is expected to maintain segregation from all male members in the private as well as in the public sphere. What is actually transpiring with regard to the rituals, however, is a different scenario from the one depicted in the texts. Women are increasingly disregarding the rules around segregating themselves from men. Many of them point to the outcome of violating the taboo and observe that no observable harm comes to men. This indicates that the level of pollution they supposedly transmitted was in fact meager thus allowing women to understand purity and pollution under different qualifications. Others perceive the segregation policies to be applicable only to near relatives as they also stand to be affected if men lose their strength and vitality and end up being sick. Still others consider the changing hygienic standards that have been introduced because of technological advancement to have played a role in transforming the understanding of menstruation taboos. Women realize that the restraints placed on their involvement in tasks like cooking and their presence in certain areas had mostly to do with the lack of measures that could ensure cleanliness in the past. With poor makeshift alternatives for sanitary napkins in the form of rags and no running water in the homes for timely showers, women understand that seclusion in menstrual huts were practical compromises shrouded under the guise of religion and tradition. Punita, a 31-year-old from the U.K. had a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon.

I have not read any history books to confirm my understanding. But I believe in olden days they did not have any tampons or sanitary napkins to keep the bleeding at hold or to ensure that we were not contaminating, well contaminating is not the right word, well to ensure that, you know, we were presentable enough. However, and that is probably why women were kept in a different place and let to do whatever they wanted to do and it

would be like the seven days of heaven when they wouldn't have to do any household chores.

Therefore, in a slow but sure manner menstruation rituals began to reflect women's changing understanding of purity and pollution. Pollution limits and boundaries began to constantly be revised and redefined to acclimate current forms of rituals to the current style of living. Finally, the factor that heavily influences the understanding of purity rituals is the Hindu tradition that makes allowances for occasional and accidental slip-ups in the observance of menstrual taboos. This provision occurs in the form of *Rishi Panchami*, an annual festival where women atone for unintentional and inadvertent transgressions they engaged in throughout the year. This clause has allowed for women to understand menstruation and purity and pollution related rituals in a different light, a thorough examination of which will be carried out in the next section in this chapter.

In all the customs outlined above, what is explicit is that changes in women's rituals underscore the social events that are engendering the changes. In the midst of those changes occurring in the nature of the rituals, the changing boundaries of purity and pollution often go unnoticed. What also is disregarded is that the changing definition of purity and pollution also mark the unusual nature of menstruation rituals. While we have discussed how the Hindu understanding of purity and pollution regarding menstruation is unique, a further delving into the intricacies of the Hindu festival of *Rishi Panchami* makes this unusual constitution of the purity pollution complex even more prominent.

Rishi Panchami

Rishi Panchami, a festival that takes place in the month of August or September, is understood best as a composite with the festival of *Teej*, which is also a festival that is solely dedicated to women (Bennett 1976). While *Teej* is celebrated by women in the form of

purificatory fasting for the long life of husbands, the highlight of *Rishi Panchami* is a cleansing bath to atone for ritualistic underperformance during menstruation (Bennett 1976). The interrelatedness of the two festivals is not apparent at first glance, a deeper rumination of the intent behind the two festivals indicates that the ritualistic practices help curb the threats that women's sexualities pose to the life and health of men. Thus, the expressed purposes of the two festivals are very similar: both work to keep women's sexual powers under control.

Women's fasting during *Teej* with the intent to prolong one's husband's life insinuates that women have sway over their husbands' life span: this notion gets even more traction when the ascetic values of women's sexual forces being debilitating to men are liberally found in religious texts. Similarly, during *Rishi Panchami*, women perform bathing rituals to purify themselves of the "possible sin of having inadvertently touched a man during menstruation" (Bennett 1976: 191). On both occasions, women are undergoing penance to influence men's fortitude, strength and vitality.

There is little disagreement over the fact that menstrual blood in the Hindu context is polluting: religious texts legitimize it, priests confirm it and practitioners endorse the proclamation with fervor. However, if we lend more interest in how menstruation came to be, we will also understand the peculiarity of menstrual blood as a pollutant while also being a signifier of life and a designator of fertility. Let us reintroduce the mythical account, which brought menstruation into existence. Indra, the king of Gods, after accidentally killing a Brahmin seeks the help of Brahma (God of creation) in ridding himself of the sin of *Brahmahatya* (the killing of a Brahmin). Brahma dissected the sin into four parts and distributed them thusly: "The first fell into the flames of fire, the second into the river the third into the mountain and the fourth into the *Rajh* (menstrual blood). And that is why these women have to be set aside with such great care"

(Sharma 1966 as cited as a translated version in Bennett 1976). Clearly, women's role as carriers of the sin is a mere coincidence. They are but stand-ins for a transgression that they have not even committed. Therefore, the arbitrary nature of women's involvement connotes that menstrual blood, while in and of itself a life-giving force, in the context of a failed fertilization comes to represent an arbitrary form of defilement. Thus, inbuilt in the makeup of taboos and rituals around the regulation of the taboos is a clause, by way of the *Rishi Panchami* festival, dedicated to absolving women for having violated taboos.

Most women are not only aware of the clause but also use it to their advantage. Bina, a resident of Nepal, points to the festival where she gets to cleanse herself of her sin for having unintentionally transgressed the boundaries of the taboos.

I am thankful for this festival. No woman can always be aware of what she is touching or what rule she is breaking. I have touched my brothers and my father by mistake even though I try very hard not to. So even if the rituals seem frivolous at first glance, they insure that women allow for the dangers to be driven away from men. Women make the conscious choice of keeping men and plants safe from impurity.

The festival also serves women in that it allows a degree of negligence to sidle in all the while taking away the element of blame away from women. Some practitioners skillfully manipulate their monthly rituals to make room for the absolving that the yearly festival allows. Indira, a 29-year old single woman, is one such practitioner.

One can only be so careful. Even simple tasks like buying vegetables from the vendor at home requires me to hand him money. Sometimes my fingers brush against him. Is that intentional? No, but if I tried hard I am sure I could avoid it. But I don't. Because our tradition forgives us for these faults. If it is in our tradition, ummm, I mean we are then allowed to, how do I say it, use it. I touch so many other men at work, in the market. I don't want to be responsible for their sickness when I don't even know I touched them. In that case, I might just stay home and not touch anyone. So I am not very careful around men. I don't fret over the everyday contact that occurs. The fast will take care of it.

Interestingly enough, Indira also points out later that perhaps she would have been careful to begin with were she not aware of the *Rishi Panchami* clause. Trishna's manipulation of the

clause is highly indicative of how many women understand menstruation pollution—an anachronistic tradition that has latched on to the culture for the sake of its cultural capital.

I don't know, I also feel that we are allowed to break rules. As long as you feel bad about it. I am not perfect in what I do when I have *nachune*. I cook food and bring it to work. My male coworkers eat the food. Now, should I announce it these men? As long as they don't know and as long as I follow the practices during *Rishi Panchami*, no one is shriveling [Laughs].

When asked about the precautions she takes to not be in contact with initiated men, Trishna could not hide her incredulity at my naiveté.

Now, you don't actually believe all that stuff. I was taught to do that but I also was taught by my 70-year-old grandmother. She was raised in the old era. These things are there so that we have our culture, not so that we waste time noticing whom we touch and how many times. Just shower during *Rishi Panchami*, you will be fine.

I was also later coached by Trishna that the cleansing shower during *Rishi Panchami* need not be 365 times (one shower per day for all the days in a calendar year) and it did not have to be done by the book. In her perception, a full-fledged acknowledgement of one's wrongdoing during one's menses could make recompense for all intentional and inadvertent laxness.

The narratives outlined depict some of the practitioners' utilization of *Rishi Panchami* to redress transgressions that are to a certain extent avoidable. Women are aware that their peccadilloes are volitional. However, it is important to understand that many women utilize *Rishi Panchami* for its intended purposes—to compensate for inadvertent contact with initiated men during menstruation. What is essential to note in observing women's acceptance and (mis)utilization of *Rishi Panchami* is its contribution in clarifying the subtleties of stigma or the absence thereof in women's understanding of taboos around menstruation.

Conclusion

While the vocabulary of women clearly denotes that menstruation has strong associations with pollution and bodily impurities, the period and the ensuing rituals do not carry a high level

of stigma. The only form of stigma that is palpable is among menstruants who are not a part of this study but face the most severe proscriptions around menstruation: they spend their menses in menstrual huts, which are but shabby stand-ins for a shelter with no running water, no electricity, and sometimes a space women have to share with domesticated animals. In fact, in the context of Nepalese women in Nepal and the diaspora, the term stigma does not do justice to the way women experience menstruation and the rituals around the phenomenon. Women are not ashamed of being menstruants. In fact, there is a level of unspoken pride that accompanies one's capacity as a menstruant, a quality that is more tangible among women who are considered to be of the acceptable birthing age. The pride, however, also does not denote that women are comfortable as menstruating individuals. They take great measures to keep the manifestations of their menses private: sanitary napkins are disposed off quickly, rags are kept concealed even while drying, menstruating women try and distance themselves from religious occasions so their inactivity or lack of participation does not provide an open indication of their current status as a menstruant. Many often voice disappointment at the tradition because their impure status often made them unavailable to participate in festivals like *Dasain* and *Tihaar*. Manipulation of periods by taking birth control pills is a common practice during the period surrounding the two festivals. Women in Bhutan, India, and Nepal just think of those as medications that help regulate menstrual cycles and are rarely aware that their primary purpose is to regulate³ pregnancy. Despite these oft-practiced measures to hide menstruation and oft-felt dissatisfaction at missing certain festivals, when asked if they felt stigmatized, women would often respond in the negative.

³ Among the women who participated in this study, only some participants in the U.S. used them regularly and others alluded to these not always being effective.

The language of shame—not stigma—was only apparent in the narratives of abnegators who accorded a great degree of internal discomfort to their social statuses as menstruants. The adherents and the modifiers mostly looked upon it as a mundane monthly routine that had religious undertones and cultural capital embedded in the structure. Since almost all women experienced menstruation in one form or another, the thought of it as stigmatizing was fairly foreign to them. Terms such as a hindrance, uncomfortable, annoying, painful, relief, and rest were brought up frequently indicating the stark absence of the term shame and its myriad cousins. Therefore, understanding menstruation as a complex phenomenon that is draped in all tones of fabric is essential. Focusing on its polluting nature tells us an incomplete story that is rendered partially “complete” by understanding the story behind the “purity” counterpart. Similarly, chronicling the change in the rituals without accepting the purity pollution continuum renders the understanding deficient. Perhaps, most importantly, embracing the flexibility of what aspect of the ritual is considered purity enhancing and what facet of the phenomenon is regarded as pollution boosting will allow us to clearly understand the purity rituals’ forceful presence in the Nepalese landscape. It is the flexibility in the shaping of the purity rituals that combat the pollutants and allow for the rigid existence of what is considered pure and what is regarded as polluting.

CHAPTER V

ADAPTIVE RELIGIOSITY

The characterization of menstruating women as taboo is commonplace in numerous cultures. While many scholars view taboos as means to subordinate women (see Delaney 1988; Shuttle and Redgrove 2004; Taylor 1988; Weideger 1977; Young and Bacdayan 1965), “the woman-as-subservient” perspective is rendered deficient when the taboos’ ritual powers are consigned to women to dictate and police (Buckley 1982; Kahn 1931; Knight 1991; Powers 1980) and further complicated when we understand this as a by-product of the patriarchal system. Such is the case of women of Nepalese origin overseeing women and girls’ compliance with the Nepalese ritual demands of abstinence from sexual and numerous household activities (such as with food preparation) and isolation from religious festivities and areas of worship during menstruation.

My interviews with Hindu women of Nepalese origin reveal a conflicting relationship that women share with the menstrual taboos—given the advent of the modern, largely non-religious era, often apparent is the discord between the familiar religious pull to conform to the taboos and the more trendy secular push that entices women to transgress the ritualistic norms. Caught between this predicament is the omnipresent deliberation about women’s agency; a domain that becomes even more tempestuous when I examine women’s rationales behind upholding the taboos even when the menstruation rituals seem replete with restrictive regulations. By shining light on how women who follow the rituals partially or completely are in essence “doing religion” (see Avishai 2008) but in a more adaptive manner, I propose the conception of *adaptive religiosity*. This coinage creates room for a discourse on multiple religiosities embodied by practitioners as they navigate their religious practices through local and

global spheres. Additionally, it offers perspectives in understanding an oft-ignored manifestation of agency among religious followers (for a detailed discussion of agency in gender traditional religions see Burke 2012) who are adherents of the religious codes of menstruation during a time when modification of the codes has become the norm.

To chronicle the modification of rituals, it is essential to examine the agency that women have wielded in adapting the rituals to suit the needs of their changing lifestyles. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to delve into the more nuanced rendition of agentival capacities in people, it becomes important to understand that the scholarly discourse on agency has moved toward recognizing its course as a pendulous one between the extremes of autonomous free will and total subjugation (Fuchs 2001; Gustafsson-Larsson et al. 2007). This not only allows for a clear comprehension of a heterogeneous manifestation of agency among religious participants but also helps cultivate agency as a concept that has, in the recent past, procured more room to reveal the varying possibilities of human capacity to act on her own volition.

By using the ideas of an agency and a religiosity continuum as springboards, this chapter explores fifty-four Nepalese women's adaptive undertaking of religiosity and agency in their adherence to menstrual rituals (stringently or moderately based on how women indicated they performed the rituals), when the alternative option of abnegating them has become attainable in the current cultural climate. By paying careful attention to the discourses of women in Nepal and the Nepalese diaspora in Bhutan, India, the U.K. and the U.S.A who follow menstruation rituals stringently or modify the rituals (eight women who have abnegated the rituals have been excluded from this chapter), my research seeks to examine the transformation of menstrual taboos over space and time. As a corollary, the study also appraises the transformation of the pathways of doing religion as religious entities migrate to different corners of the globe. The

following sections examine thoroughly the concept of adaptive religiosity to help impart a better understanding of the intricate configuration of menstrual taboos.

Adaptive Religiosity

In an attempt to understand the modification of menstrual rituals and the agency wielded by religious women who follow the rituals (partially or fully), I expand on Avishai's idea of "doing religion in a secular world." The phenomenon of "doing religion" is "a mode of conduct and being, a performance of identity" while "becoming an authentic religious subject against an image of a secular Other" (2008, 413). As advanced by Avishai (2008), the performance of religion is a purposeful pursuit of religious customs and practices to attain religiosity. Avishai asserts that attaining ends that are extra-religious through religious pursuits is extraneous and should not take away from the fact that religion can be done simply "for the pursuit of religious goals" (413). In close agreement with Avishai, I suggest that the popular approach of understanding women's agency in conservative religions—looking at women's strategic partial compliance or "creative conformity" (Bucar 2010)—is cursory; it does not embrace women who comply with the religious teachings to be devout individuals, nor does it explain why the agency of women who do offer rationales for strategic compliance is often undermined even when their ultimate goal is attaining religiosity. For women living in social settings where following a religion in its full complexity is unattainable and they have strategies in place to practice religion to the capacity that is possible, adaptive religiosity allows for their reverence to not be suspected.

To address these shortcomings in the study of religious women's agentic modalities, I delineate how many women in my study undertake an adaptive form of religiosity to fulfill their roles as devout individuals. They do so by bridging the chasm between the permanence of religious pronouncements and the transience of cultural mores. The term *adaptive religiosity*, as I

define it, does not denote the evolutionary adaptation of religion. Rather, the term in the context of this study symbolizes the individual forms of adaptive measures—both cognitive and corporeal—that devotees undertake in attempts to become religious individuals. Women execute an adaptive form of religiosity by embracing those traditional religious practices that seem meritorious after they have appraised the worth and practicality of the rituals in their social milieu. This form of religiosity embraces the social, cultural, and religious contexts of the environment in which the women live. It also promotes the acceptance of the individual variation in women's actions (eg. modifying the rituals, stringently adhering to the rituals, abnegating the rituals) that are impacted by the circumstances in which they reside.

While the research on modification of rituals among ritual practitioners and the corresponding literature on it is burgeoning (Afshar 2008; Gallagher 2007; Mir 2009; Narasimhan 2011; Ulrich 1992), scant attention has been paid to the significance of religiosity in women's lives independent of as well as in close conjunction with the minor or major modifications they make in the practice of rituals to acclimate themselves to their social milieu. Steele (2011) addresses one aspect of the issue when she identifies the adaptations made by religious institutions to offset rigid moral codes that turn away many potential followers of such institutions. As outlined by Steele, this flexibility on the part of the churches in permitting modified moral codes allows unwed adolescent mothers in Brazil to be embraced by religious institutions during a time when they are waging an internal battle against the doctrinal immorality of conceiving a baby out of wedlock or considering abortion as a viable recourse. While religious institutions' appropriation of this adaptive form of religiosity is garnering attention in the scholarly realm (see Marti 2010) and so is the adaptive form of religiosity coopted by priests, (see Srinivas 2006) the other side of the adaptation issue that considers the

meaning of these adaptations for practitioners of faith and how and if at all that shapes their religious identity has amassed little interest. To cast light on this oft-ignored side of the equation, this chapter specifically looks at women's understanding of their religious selves and the agency they wield as they make modifications to the menstruation rituals in their diverse social settings. I demonstrate the workings of adaptive religiosity by examining how women from Nepal and the Nepalese diaspora living in India, Bhutan, the U.K., and the U.S. offer similar accounts of their attempts at religiosity even when they adopt diverse paths to attain their goal.

An essential element to confront at this juncture is the parameters that dictate the confines of adaptive religiosity. Which practitioners are adapting religion for the sake of being religious? Which others are adapting religious mores for the sheer sake of comfort, as a deceptive measure, out of laxness, and are offering religiously laced rationales for such actions? These questions require diligent deliberation if we can comfortably embrace adaptive religiosity as a scientific phenomenon that can be expanded to understand other religions and their respective forms of religiosities. This conundrum in the context of the current study became fairly easy to tackle as most of the participants in this study offer the common element of fear and respect of God as a rationale, a clause, or a consideration in their respective forms of ritual compliance. If the participants in whatever capacity are monitoring their menstruating selves out of respect or fear of God then their narrative presentations need to be accepted for what they are: sometimes contradictory at other times non-conflicting, sensible efforts at understanding their complex socio-religious selves. Therefore, the requisite that fulfills the element of adaptive nature of religiosity in this study is if practitioners are taking adaptive measures with religious consequences in mind.

In the following sections, I first detail how women of Nepalese descent understand their roles as practitioners of rituals in their path to religiosity. I then discuss how a deeper understanding of women's varying paths toward religiosity enhances our theoretical understanding of religious women's agencies and the understanding of the importance of culture and religion in how women perceive themselves as menstruants in their respective social spheres.

Pathways to Adaptive Religiosity

While embracing a religion typically implies a comprehensive acceptance of beliefs, rituals, rites, and religious dicta, religious actors in all religions are increasingly adapting these components to suit their social landscapes (see Williams 2004). This adaptation often takes on the form of creative ritual negotiation, which manifests into different morphologies as practitioners grapple with the attainment of religiosity in varying religious panoramas (see Hinnels 1997). In the absence of social scenarios that are conducive for practicing conventional religious rituals, many devotees utilize cognitive or somatic means to create an environment such that deficiency in ritual practice does not preclude them from becoming religious individuals. Many others employ inventive compliance in social milieus where there is an excess of situations favoring the performance of conventional rituals. This way they can observe practices they consider feasible and abandon those that seem outdated or disagreeable. In the following section, I outline the inventive ways the women adopt on their path to religiosity. In doing so, I categorize these adaptive techniques by identifying similarities in women's ritual modification. By classifying these techniques as those taking place in Nepal, the Nepalese diaspora in the U.K. and the U.S.A, and the diaspora in Bhutan and India, I seek to illustrate some differences in women's accommodation of the rituals in these various locations while also demonstrating how despite their varying pathways toward accommodation they are simply trying to retain their

religious rectitude. It is also essential to note here that some of these techniques are common among the Nepalese in Nepal and in the diaspora or are shared by at least two groups. The presence of an accommodation technique in one category and not in another is not indicative of mutual exclusivity; rather the categorization highlights the frequency with which the techniques of adaptability are engaged in the narratives in particular locations.

Nepalese women in Nepal and their adaptations

The following sections outline the themes common among Nepalese women in Nepal in their path toward adaptive religiosity.

Acceptance of altered versions of prescribed rules

Five women in Nepal report adopting practices that mark their preference for altered rules over prescribed rules. They are also quick to point out the driving force behind this course of action. Sasha, a 52-year-old, who is married to a very liberal man, is always caught in the web of appeasing the Gods and satisfying her non-believer husband by striking a balance between stringency and leniency when it came to the practice of rituals.

She provides an apt illustration of how women formulate their own rules that mirror prescribed rules in meaning but are very dissimilar in action. While the prescribed rules call for women to sleep away from the husband, most preferably on the ground, she modifies the rule by sleeping on the same bed as her husband but by refraining from touching him during the course of the night. This action of hers convinces her husband that she does not abide by rituals he considers anachronistic. It also reassures her that she has not broken the religious code that demands physical separation from her husband. While most women adapt the rituals for reasons different than the one offered by Sasha, their intent behind the adaptations are similar—they strive to strike a balance between their religious pursuits and their secular objectives. Sarala

provides a context in which these modified rules are deployed with a similar intent but a different import.

I have never cooked for my husband or my father-in-law during menstruation. But when I see Rajan, my ten-year-old boy, reaching the counters for chips, I can't help it. I use separate utensils to cook for him; these are, how do I say, separately marked? I do have to touch the stove for that, but at least we don't use firewood these days. Modern appliances are also a creation of Gods. So, I mean, I think I will be fine.

Sarala's mention of firewood hints at the absence of a "real" fire. The account used here helps her perceive of the use of the flame produced by a "modern" stove as not as sacrilegious as the use of the flame emanating from firewood. This harkens back to the prominent place of fire rituals in the Hindu tradition as a means of purification of the physical body and as a source of vitality and energy (Bentor 2000). Thus, the use of the modern appliance that produces "pseudo" fire helps counter the "irreverent" act Sarala is engaging in by preparing food for a young male member during her menstrual stage. Here Sarala is intimating that her action is permissible given that it serves the interest of the family. Because the family is an entity to which she owes indubitable allegiance, she is able to rationalize her modification while simultaneously asserting her religious faithfulness.

Altered perception of ritual practice

Another method women use to "modify" the rituals is by altering their perception of ritual practice. Twelve women used ways to relegate their forms of practices as the less stringent kind and claimed that I would be "shocked to see what other women practice during their period." I was curious to understand this phenomenon whereby many women understood their practices as "kehi pani gardina"—I don't do anything. Once I began asking further questions, women began adding "trivial" things to their "I-don't-do-anything" list. Some of these "minor" practices that they did practice included not cooking, not visiting temples, abstaining from any

form of religious worship, sleeping on different beds than their husbands for some women, and not entering the kitchen at all during the four-day period for a few others. A quick glance at the list of practices that women are seen performing during menstruation as spelled out by Kandel et al. (n.d.) and Bennett (1976a) mirrors many of the practices listed by the women. By comparing themselves against the ritual martinet, women attest that they do just what is essential to keep the Gods' wrath at bay. This way they are able to look upon themselves as practitioners who are not breaking the code of the rituals. Dhara's account provides a clear understanding of the phenomenon described above.

Now, it is just like this, I do what little I can. I can't do things like the Bahuns [Brahmins] but I do what little I can. I have Ram to help me cook so I don't go near the kitchen. Have my own bed. Don't go to temples, you know, the same thing that you must have heard so many times.

This perception is reiterated by Suprina as such:

I really don't do much. If you see what Rani does you will be surprised. Rani is a little too much. She does not even go to the kitchen, she does not even (smirks) touch the faucet. So she can't wash the clothes, dishes, nothing. She just sits there, like a sick person. Now I, I do..., I always..., touch the faucet during *Nachune* and that does not make me irreligious, does it? If that were so, everyone I know would be cursed by God.

With varying understanding of what would actually befall women if they transgress the prescribed rituals, women prescribe a lower threshold for religious devotion and establish that religious commitment does not necessitate taking extreme measures of ritual practice. By comparing themselves against the "other" who in this case happens to be a deeply religious individual, women believe that extreme devotion can in fact be detrimental for families. They affirm that women's physical isolation from many everyday tasks that are not called for in the scriptures does not make one more religious. In labeling these individuals and their practices as superfluous, they mark the distinction between those who are religiously profligate and those

who do it just right. While women in this category do not necessarily modify their practices, they perceive of them as adaptive versions of those rituals practiced by the orthodox “other.”

Extra-religious ends as mere means on path toward religiosity

Twelve of the 18 women from Nepal look upon the four days of menses as a “period of rest” during which they can temporarily give up many of their day-to-day tasks and actually relax. Purnima, a 35-year-old adherent from a small town in Nepal, considers this a welcome change from the monotony of the daily chores. Speaking of her feelings about isolating herself for the four days, she opines:

My mother in law doesn't let me do anything. She says it is time for women to rest. So that aspect is good. But after my period I will have to do everything that has been piling up for the 4 days. So I don't know if the rest is good or bad. More than liking or disliking, it is about how you can show your devotion to god. Now if you go to the temples then you have polluted the temple, a holy place. If you cook then the whole family will eat what you are cooking, which is also not right. So in a way we get to rest and also to cleanse ourselves of the dirt in our body. I would not feel right if I knew a woman was cooking if she were menstruating.

In the account above, Purnima indicates that though the period of rest allows her to physically relax her body, the rest period also comes with a clause. It will be her responsibility to cater to the mounting household duties after the fourth day of her period. Thus, the rest period perceived by many to be an extra-religious perquisite of following the rituals also comes appended with hindrances. On one hand, the period allows women to stay away from many domestic duties. On the other hand, it does not restrain them from participating in other duties outside the kitchen. Women can still clean, do laundry, and run errands and, in most cases, are expected to do so in Nepal. Hence, they are aware that the “rest period” does not promise complete respite. More importantly, the period of rest is mandated by a certain role that women must exhibit. Women are allowed the period of rest only when they are menstruating owing to their impure status. The impure state they embody during menstruation and the rest window they get because they are

menstruating underscore their transient stigmatized roles—roles they cannot choose to adopt at their whim. The stipulation that restricts women from being involved in many activities takes away from the idea of rest and gives more of a hint of curtailed freedom, an oxymoron in itself. It, therefore, becomes important to understand that women's desire to follow the rituals of isolating themselves from the kitchen and other household activities does not just indicate a yearning for some downtime but also their aspiration to show their devotion to God, as is clearly discernible from Purnima's account.

Another interesting facet of the interruption of the domestic work for menstruating women living in extended families is the mothers-in-law entering the domestic domain, an area which they have formally passed on to their daughters-in-law. This temporary comeback is not looked upon as a hassle by most mothers-in-law. In fact, by "helping" the daughters-in-law they are able to show their magnanimity and highlight their always "pure" capacity to their daughters-in-law. This in turn brings to the fore the presence of an environment that is watchful and regulating. With tradition following elders and priests to remind women of their duties as menstruants, the invisible force of God gains even more prominence and reminds women of their "religious" obligations on a regular basis.

The narrative that Purnima offers exemplifies the ambivalence women often have to battle as rigorous practitioners. Rather than accepting ambivalence as a part and parcel of the observance of religion, the stringent adherents question the ambivalence and proffer reasons why despite the contradictions the rituals of menstruation are worthy of being honored. This offers a window into the agency wielded by women while also underscoring women's pursuit of adaptive religiosity that allows for individual paths toward religious fulfillment. Therefore, the contradiction embedded in the connotation of the ritual period as a rest period is understood in

conjunction with the “rest” or interruption that women actively seek from religious activities. This clearly highlights women’s effort at attaining religiosity in individual ways by crafting rationales that take into consideration the discrepancies and yet embrace the rituals for their religious capital.

Adaptations among women of Nepalese origin in the U.K and the U.S.A.

The Nepalese women residing in the U.K. and the U.S. offer characteristically different adaptive modalities than the ones adopted by Nepalese women in Nepal. The sections below will highlight some of the more common modalities observed in participants’ narratives.

Ritual modification a necessity

The aspiration to be devout is present even among women who modify rituals for what might seem to be extra-religious ends. What irks the women who have altered the rituals in one form or another, however, is the frequently made claim by people in Nepal that they are somehow less devout. While seven of twenty one women do admit that they are relieved to adapt the rituals so that the cooking while menstruating has now become the quotidian, others firmly assert that if they had a favorable environment like that back in Nepal where they could carry out the rituals in their entirety, they would gladly do so to demonstrate their piety. They further opine that decreased ritual observance is essential for the proper functioning of nuclear families. With the growing proliferation of nuclear families among Nepalese households everywhere (Goldstein and Beall 1986), the absence of extended family members results in women having to give up some rituals, by choice or unwillingly, thereby narrowing the number of practices they can actually perform. This usually includes the ritual of abstaining from entering the kitchen to prepare meals. Women offer that ridding themselves of the ritual of refraining from cooking for the family helps in the successful completion of everyday chores. It not only allows for men to

work longer hours since they are then not compelled to hurry home for the purposes of meal preparation, but it also ensures that both the husband and the wife can save time in meal preparation by allowing the wife to partake in a duty at which she is adept.

In the absence of an extended family, a highly observant society, and the distinct presence of a society where taboos related to menstruation are non-existent, Rita, a newly-wed residing in the U.S.A. let go of the rituals that her mother-in-law very strictly enforced back in Nepal. Reflecting the thoughts of most of the interviewees living in the U.S., Rita voiced that “life in America was tough and with both me and my husband joining the work force, there was very little room for the observance of the rituals.” She added, “I felt a sense of shame at not having honored the rituals that even the Hindu Goddesses are said to have practiced, but you have to let go if you want to fit in the U.S. society and make a living. I can’t see my husband come late from work and then have to go to the kitchen to prepare meals.”

Apparent in Rita’s narrative is the guilt at having given up an aspect of the practice even when it was done to make life easier for the family. This guilt pushes Rita to be excessively observant of rituals to propitiate the Gods even when some of these are contrary to what is spelled in the religious texts—she showers three times a day right before she prepares meals. She sleeps on a mattress in the living room, in an obvious effort to physically distance herself from her husband. Evident in her efforts are the creative means by which she has maintained her endeavor at religiosity. Also discernible in her narrative is how she dispels the notion that modifiers amend the rituals for personal ease. In fact, she suggests that they might be more meticulous in following other forms of rituals than those who follow them traditionally. Deep conviction toward the religion rather than strategizing for extra-religious ends is what motivates most women to follow rituals even when the regulatory gaze of a strict society is not upon them.

Priya, a 33-year-old living in the U.S. attested to the change as being borne out of necessity.

It simply does not work here. The culture is different. The ways of society are different. Avoiding spaces and contact with people is difficult here. At least there are not many religious holidays you can observe because you are so far away from Nepal, so you do not have to go against that as well. But the small things like touching men, cooking for your family that needs to change. And it is not just me. If you ask others, you have already, so you must have noticed that too, right? But you will never hear them saying that they fast during their period or that they had a *puja* during their period. That will never happen. We will never go against God.

Other modifiers frequently broached this recurrent theme and identified other areas of menstrual rituals they religiously followed. They strictly curtailed the daily prayer sessions in the shrines most women had in their own homes and temple visits, the latter made easier by a dearth of temples in foreign land or substantial distance of temples from their area residence. Many women also refrained from touching plants or watering them. Others paid heed to the prescriptions in religious edicts about having separate sleeping quarters for the menstruant.

For yet other modifiers, the application of all forms of the bodily taboos was not a necessary constituent of faith but simply an execution of a long-established custom. They strongly felt that their adaptations of the rituals should be observed and appraised through the lens of their social context, which they believed was regulating their action of modifying the rituals. Nirja, a 29-year-old residing in the U.K, suggests:

All this nonsense of not cooking, not touching cooked food, not touching your husband is an archaic carry over of old Hindu men trying to make their idiosyncrasies heard and remembered for centuries. These have nothing to do with being religious but everything to do with keeping your tradition alive. Men and their version of what is supposedly our tradition!

Many women like Nirja vocalize their dubiousness regarding the legitimacy of religious teachings and thus, by distancing the rituals from their religious capital, establish their own modality of religion, which allows them to be both malleable and rigorous in their pursuit of

rituals as they carve their religious identities. Nirja, for instance, was usually the organizer of many social gatherings during major festivals. She was fully invested in the celebratory aspects while also managing well the ritual aspect of the festivals and attested that she was one of the few women who fasted on a regular basis to appease deities.

The accounts that Rita, Priya and Nirja offer exemplify the internal debate women often have to engage in as modifiers. As originators of ritual modification, women work hard to attain religiosity despite the presence of barriers, self-imposed or otherwise. Thus, I extend the idea of devout women not just following rituals for the lone purpose of achieving extra-religious ends but also for paving the path toward becoming religious individuals. The understanding of who they are as religious individuals varies from one woman to another. Some perceive the participation in the most important festivals as an important marker of religiosity, others observe fasts, visit temples regularly, and establish altars in their homes. The conscious and subconscious decision-making phase where they choose to practice the rituals despite inherent contradictions and economic and social barriers equips them with religious agency, which in turn bestows upon them the tool to perform adaptive religiosity. This adaptive form of religiosity allows these women to seek their religious goals conscientiously.

Redefining space and body in acceptance and modification of rituals

Twenty of the twenty-two women residing in the U.K. and the U.S. who are adherents and modifiers point out that one aspect of the taboos that had the most impact was the fear of God, which called for isolation from religious activities. They also looked upon the taboos as a part of the unknown realm of religion—the consequences of defying the taboos were unidentified and fear-inducing. To make sense of this unknown realm, women redefine spaces to complement what is practically possible to consider pure in their social surroundings. Similarly,

they also redefine the perception of their bodies as impure on certain occasions and not as polluted on other occasions. This redefined meaning corresponds to their perception of the confines within which impure bodies should be secluded in religious spaces and contexts.

Chandri, a 53-year-old customer service representative at a retail store who lives in the U.S., said that she refrained from going near the *pooja area* (the prayer area with idols and pictures of Gods and Goddesses within each home). Ashita, a 25-year-old working woman in the U.K., made clear demarcations about the rules of being allowed to step on the hardwood floor but not on the carpeted area near the *pooja area*. Forty-five-year-old Manisha from the U.K. allowed her family to eat the meals prepared by her, but acknowledged that she would never dream of offering the delicacies made by her to the Gods when she is menstruating. Recurring among the women's narratives is how women avoid areas associated with God during menstruation. Even though women have their own way of stipulating what a "pure area" is or how pure their bodies are for various tasks, the fear of the unknown is apparent in the way they maneuver their menstruating selves around prayer areas and around religious undertakings. This fear, therefore, helps women perform the rituals despite the inherent ambiguities in them.

Junu, a highly educated Nepalese immigrant, provides her understanding of the contradictions in the ritualistic undertaking. By drawing out the differences in menstruation practices of U.S. natives and Nepalese women, she acknowledges the weak face value of the rituals but at the same time asserts their importance in the attainment of religiosity.

The men here are not dying by being in touch with menstruating women, nor are the women being punished for their misdeeds. I know different religions profess contradictory pronouncements. I also know God would not discriminate between followers of different faiths. So I know the rituals are deficient in utilitarian value. But that does not mean you are willing to put your faith on test in front of God. The Christians here and the Muslims are equally invested in worship and prayer even when many of them question their utility. So no matter the religion, the rituals are there to keep the faith alive, the faith in God who is capable of both love and harm. The rituals may not

be practical or they may not even be useful in any way but they have their worth in building faith in people in this increasingly faithless world.

While the above account clearly speaks of Junu's perspicacity, other women are also no less discerning when they point out that when they touch plants the plants do not wither, a message contrary to what they had been told all their lives. They are aware that no observable harm comes to men, if they accidentally come in physical contact with them. If this were the case, they wonder, how would half the world survive given that the majority of the women who are not Nepalese are not following the taboos? However, when it came to the affairs of God, they could not make themselves believe that something ominous would not befall them if they violated the taboos associated with religious isolation. Therefore, the realm of unknown, which accompanies the thought of violating the taboos laid forth by God is awe and fear inspiring and, thus, encourages women to practice the rituals religiously. This strategic, individualized, and personalized decision-making process, where women mull over with the most sedulous care about the flaws and imperfections of religious rites and rituals and then opt for rigor as they perceive it and craft it despite the contradictions inherent in the rituals, makes a strong case for women's effort at adaptive religiosity.

Adaptations of rituals by women of Nepalese origin in Bhutan and India

As a group markedly different from the group residing in the U.K. and the U.S., Nepalese women of Hindu origin in Bhutan and Nepal showcase unique as well as common elements in their religious modalities. The sections below will offer elucidating examples.

Women espousing to be culture carriers en route to religiosity

The practitioner role that women take on during menstruation plays an important function in the identity formation as a culture bearer for some women. Michael Lambek points out, "If the semantic content of the taboo elaborates who or what one is not, it is the practice of

the taboo that substantiates who one is” (1992, 248). Eight women from India and Bhutan believe very strongly in their roles as keepers of culture, and by adhering to these menstruation rituals, they enact the role of a culture carrier. They feel that they have an active part to play in their roles as preservers of cultural and traditional values, included among which are also the religious values. The 44-year-old resident of a mid-size town in India, Uma, was vocal about being an advocate for preserving the rituals.

I am the only one in the family who still sleeps on the ground, on the floor when I have *nachune*. There are things that are difficult to do, like, you know, not being included in festivals *Dasain* and *Tihaar* that only come once a year, but there are also things that are easy to do like sleeping on a mattress on the floor. This is the only way these practices are going to carry on by practicing the hard ones and savoring the easier ones. I have asked my daughter-in-law to do all she can too, but you know, so that these do not become like other customs we used to have, all gone, only Western ways now. A little bit of change is needed but that does not mean you give up everything.

Author: What kind of changes do you believe should be allowed?

Uma: The people down the street have converted to Christianity and don't do any of these things. Please say no to that kind of change. I will not let that happen to this household while I am alive. I will save my religion and culture.

Here, Uma uses the rationale of being a culture carrier for having scrupulously followed the rituals. She believes that as a member of the Nepalese culture, she is responsible for preserving tradition. It is not unusual for women to carry this pressure that Uma feels to preserve her culture: Women often take on the shared responsibility among themselves to uphold culture (see Hegland 1998; Jacobs 2002).

Like several others, Uma expresses discontent that her tradition is being supplanted by Western religions and values. In order to conserve what little is left of such customs, she believes in actively pursuing whatever aspects of the rituals that are feasible. Therefore, she justifies practicing the rituals for their cultural capital even when she admits they can be rigorous. Uma's account typifies how rationales such as the one she offered provide a window into women's agentival action—they practice religion by basing their religious pursuits on cognitive decisions

about the perceived right and the wrong, the practical and the impractical. This way women's agentic selves become underscored as they decide to practice adaptive religiosity because the religious benefits they choose, they assert in their interviews, outweigh the flaws. Uma, for instance, mentions in her transcript how receiving God's blessings hold a higher significance than the sadness that engulfs her when she doesn't get to participate in a festival where women get to worship their brothers to protect them from evil influences so they, in turn, can protect the sisters from all varieties of bodily harm. She provides this rationale well aware that her brother, who lived overseas, had put the effort to travel across two continents to participate in the ceremony after a period of five years.

Uma is not alone in discussing the role of the Nepalese woman as a culture carrier. Seven others reiterate the same stance. Anima, a resident of Bhutan also opines that the resolute practice of menstrual seclusion among some women is a signifier of the active role Nepalese women take in keeping alive their rich religio-cultural heritage.

It is difficult to keep these practices alive here, you know. Many of our Nepali practices are not practiced any more or people are afraid to do them. And my daughter knows about *Dasain* and *Tihaar* and that is it. So when I can, you know, teach her about this ritual, I will teach her whatever I know, whatever I can do. And even if we make mistakes, we Hindus have... what is that called? Hmm... We still have *Shree Panchami*. By making mistakes we at least learn of our culture and religion and keep them from becoming extinct... My daughter goes to school and says that *nachune* is normal and that we don't need to be hiding it from Gods. She wants to run around the temples but this will kill our custom. Even if it is normal I want her to see it as a ritual for God.

Anima believes that despite the ordinariness of the biological phenomenon women should honor the rituals around it so as to avoid their untimely death. To keep the culture, and therefore the religion, alive Anima is willing to make mistakes and then rectify them to absolve for them. Since the ties between culture and religion are interlinked in myriad ways (see Parekh 2000), by cultivating the growth of one, the women help the survival of the other. The *Shree Panchami*

reference in the excerpt is especially powerful because Anima draws upon the once-a-year festival, which is actually called *Rishi Panchami* and allows for the purification of sins carried out during menstruation by taking purifying showers 365 times (for the 365 days in a year) on one occasion. This allusion hints at how even God has authorized discretion when it is called for thereby sanctioning the correction of wrongs with the performance of certain ceremonies/rituals to atone the transgressions. Though not immediately obvious, this kind of reasoning also provides women the option to mediate agency through the self as well as through God so that religion is understood not just on the exclusive basis of ritual observance but also as a tool that allows for the individual sculpting of religious identity by utilizing external agents like Gods and priests.

As powerful vehicles, culture carriers not only provide normative meanings to religiosity but also make it look fashionable. This they do by being vocal about their commitment to tradition and diverting the attention of their audience to the enjoyable aspects of the culture. Rishi Panchami to them becomes the one occasion when women can come together in hordes in their finest attires and can luxuriate in the company of other women, food and entertainment. Many women, especially the ones living in diaspora, take on the responsibility of being culture carriers unwaveringly. Observing the rituals with devotedness is one way they shape these roles. This way, they will be looked upon as devout Hindu women who do not throw away their cultural cloaks when progress and modernization come knocking at the door.

The roles of women as culture carriers in Nepal and in the diaspora while spurred by different sentiments often carry the same deep meaning at the core. In the diaspora the belief that their rituals and tradition are either on a decline or are being challenged by the host culture often serve as rationales for reviving them. In the home country, the invasion of foreign culture is seen

a powerful force against which women must stand in opposition. Both the scenarios depict that at nucleus of the culture carrier aspiration is women's strong desire to carry their tradition forward and prevent its untimely demise.

Limited cultural immersion as reason for change in rituals

When women are aware that their ritual codes do not match traditional codes, they often invoke the rationale that they practiced what little was taught to them by the elder women in the family. These women are aware that the rituals they practice bear but a mere resemblance to the traditional rituals. Many women have only heard anecdotes about their great grandmothers sleeping on floors during menstruation. Many others have difficulty in identifying spaces they are supposed to avoid. Others barely know of the inception of the rituals. While these accounts are not uncommon among participants residing in other countries as well, women living in Bhutan and India were particularly inclined to offer rationales for what they believed was irreverent behavior. Srijana, a 21-year old from Bhutan, thought the rituals were very intriguing and suggested that had she a rule book to guide herself through the proscribed practices she would have followed them diligently. When I mentioned some of the more rigorous rituals from the religious texts she seemed to falter on her initial exuberance. However, many participants in Bhutan and India asserted that the reason for their deficiency in rituals was because of a lack of knowledge of the ritual requisites.

Srija, a 21-year-old from India, echoed the thoughts of many other participants when she suggested that she had learned the few practices that she had been taught by her mother who had learned the practices from Srija's maternal grandmother.

I know not to cook food and umm... not to go to temples during my period. My mother, she is a little rigid, does not participate in any ritual activities during festivals when she has her period but I, I am never involved in that so I never think of that as part of the rituals. When I visit my relatives in Kathmandu, two of my cousins, one is a year older

than I am and the other is two years younger, they are told not to do so many things. They have separate plates for their period. I didn't even know you had to have separate plates that you cleaned after eating and used it for the four days. That would be nice, your own plates. They also had to sit on different sofas when their father was sitting on the big one. I never knew about that too.

By attributing the lack of ritual knowledge to the limited ritual exposure given that they were not raised in Nepal, women are quick to remark that the modification of the rituals is not deliberate and is definitely not a sign of irreverence. If this were the case, then Srija, the individual introduced in the first chapter as someone plotting to enter the temples to annoy her grandmother, would actually step foot into a temple rather than just plotting about such a visit. Rather it is the result of an age-long dilution of practice—many rituals automatically lost their significance, grasp, and tenor as they were transferred from one generation to another. After establishing that rituals in their current form still allowed them to hold on to their Nepalese identity, an identity that was constantly facing challenges from other more formidable opponents like a secular identity, or for the Bhutanese nationals a national identity, women did not want their ritual imperfection to be an indication of their impiety. Therefore, even when their ritual practice was not very different from those practiced in Nepal, they were more attuned to the disparities between their form of rituals and traditional rituals that were practiced by their forbears.

Conclusion

By underscoring the influence of religion on the performance of menstrual rituals, this study highlights why understanding the taboos through a religio-cultural lens is useful. More specifically, the religio-cultural lens permits me to decipher the changes or rigidity in menstrual practices, and in the process, allows for a foray into understanding an alternative form of agency that devout women employ on a regular basis. The findings describe how women offer different

reasons for honoring or adapting the traditional Nepalese prescriptions around menstrual taboos. Their accounts help give meanings to the taboos performed. The rationales, in turn, help maintain the women's concept of the self as agentic forces rather than docile individuals following cultural norms around menstruation. By performing adaptive religiosity, many women grapple with inconsistencies in religious edicts; they ponder over the paradoxes of the religious scriptures; they have internal debates about the dubiousness about certain religious claims, and only then do they accept religion for what it is—a tool that is flexible enough to embrace practitioners' multifarious routes in exhibiting piety.

The findings support the idea that women embrace adaptive religiosity not just to quell religious ambivalence but also to make religious pursuits worthwhile. By undertaking that self-mandated commitment of performing menstruation rituals, women seek to become religious devotees to fulfill their path of religiosity. This sometimes conscious, at other times subconscious, modality of adaptive religiosity enables women to use their internal voices to make their own decisions in the oft-rigid religious domain. This also allows for a practical form of religiosity that women can identify with rather than the commonly summoned dichotomous theorizing in scholarly work—women either being blamed or lauded for modifying rituals in a “strategic effort” at secularism or attainment of extra-religious goals.

This new modality of religiosity adds to the growing understanding of changing religious boundaries in cultures all across the globe. With increasing migration patterns, modern trends, and secularization tendencies, religions are beginning to modify their architecture. An acceptance of modification tendencies on the part of religious followers as well makes the understanding of transformation in religious practices, religious conventions, and religious identities easier to recognize and unpack.

In this chapter, I highlighted the various rationales women use to grapple with the inconsistencies in and impracticality of the rituals. These rationales help women make sense of the taboos in the changing times that have called for transformation in the rituals. For many women living in the U.S.A and the U.K, the taboos are but a hindrance in the completion of very basic tasks that require the participation of menstruating women. While this is so for women living in other nations as well, it is specially pronounced for women in the U.K. and the U.S. particularly because the host cultures have little accommodating room for the observance of menstruation rituals. The practice of choosing the traditional rituals and observing them, therefore, helps them give credibility to their agentic selves whereby *they* choose to follow the rituals even when fellow Nepalese women are renouncing them (my emphasis). While they are aware that this is done by working within the boundaries of menstrual taboos, their involvement as decision-making entities gives prominence to their religious agency. For many women, the taboos are also markers of their culture and religion, which they are not ready to renounce.

Bearing resemblance to what the rituals mean for the women living in the U.S. and the U.K., the rituals carry mixed meanings for most of the women living in Bhutan and India. These rituals are cultural markers that define the roles of women as the bearers of ethnic identities. The rituals are also intrinsically linked to their roles as culture carriers, which makes them feel obligated to offer rationales for possible omissions and slips in the practice of the rituals.

For many women living in Nepal, with the looming presence of a monitoring society with priest and elders and the invisible force of God, the consequences of taboo violation are unidentified and fear-inducing. For yet others, the monthly menstruation rituals hardly seem like inconveniences; these are but simple acts of cleansing rituals carried out to please the Gods. In the latter case, women's calculated reasoning for practicing the rituals are deeply deliberate—an

indication of the employment of adaptive religiosity. Given these varied occurrences in the realm of taboos in the various societies where I interviewed the respondents, the diverse rationales from women living in three different continents to explain the practices related to the taboos are expected. What is unexpected is that the narratives of women living in Bhutan, India, the U.S. and the U.K. also clearly show similar pathways to religiosity despite the differences in the geographic and the social climate. This practice of adaptive religiosity permits them to practice religion in accordance with their perception of attainable religious goals. Thus, the concept of doing adaptive religion can provide room for the perfect combination of agency and religious observance, two concepts that are otherwise considered a mismatched duo—the presence of one always signaling the stark absence of the other. This also enriches our understanding of an adaptive religious modality, one that is apparent in practice but all but missing from scholarly discourse. Further, what is highlighted via this modality is the latitude practitioners have in molding religion to a form that is pliant and sustainable as they steer their religious selves along global terrains. Thus, religion as a miscellany of contrivance that occurs in variegated forms across time and space becomes a given rather than a still evolving discourse in the discipline of religious studies.

Menstruation rituals in the Hindu context cannot be understood in the dualistic or dichotomous concepts of purity and pollution, of empowerment and oppression, of life and death, and of negative and positive. Menstrual blood is a complex matter—it is life affirming, and yet it symbolizes death (See Biale 1997). Menstrual blood signifies momentary impurity, but in the same essence it underlines the purity that women will embody once the phase passes, thus, indicating that one cannot exist without the other. Therefore, in the Hindu context, menstrual blood is delivered a complex treatment, which is evident from the rigorous taboos

surrounding menstruation.

Given the need to understand the intricate cultural and social phenomena surrounding menstruation, I have undertaken this study to call attention to the uneasy bargain we scholars often make in trying to comprehend the “complete picture,” or the “all-encompassing theory” behind practices like menstrual taboos. The consistent skirmish between the fixity and the malleability of the rituals as practiced by women showcases the complexity of menstruation as a phenomenon. This complexity cannot be understood by centering on one facet of the taboos. By underscoring the multifaceted nature and the intricacy of these taboos, I seek to draw attention to the need to accept that rituals are interwoven with social structures like religion and culture, and that prying them apart is a task at futility. Thus, this is an endeavor to study menstruation taboos as recognized by the practitioners as both constricting and enabling in their respective social settings and identify the multifarious forms of agency women employ as they juggle the divergent religious paths offered to them.

Chapter VI

INTERGENERATIONAL AND TRANSNATIONAL TRANSFER OF RITUALS

Diaspora theorization, as undertaken by academics and laypeople alike, has in recent years resulted in the conflation of variegated categories of people who constitute the diasporas to include “immigrants, guest-workers, ethnic and ‘racial’ minorities, refugees, expatriates, and travellers” (Vertovec 2000:141). The transnationalization that has occurred in the last century has opened roads for an understanding of diasporic populations as transcending the original Jewish connotation while simultaneously accepting the historical influence and consequence of the original diaspora (Cohen 1997). In its current manifestation, diaspora can simply be defined as populations living outside of their homeland, real or imagined, because of causes as varying as deterritorialization or transnationalism (see Faist 2010; Vertovec 2000). The diaspora literature is heavily invested in understanding the scope of acculturation, survival of tradition, cultural and religious transformation, and the overall virility of the diasporic population in the new social setting. Thus, for the purposes of this study, understanding the role of diasporic parameters that showcase the changing culture and tradition in the diaspora should also help shine light on the meaning-making process that participants indulge in as they transition from their homelands to their new residences in the diaspora.

For traditions to transfer well in their diasporic journeys, the presence of three factors is imperative: the traveling culture is immune to the host culture’s plausible discomfort with new forms of cultural plurality; the traveling tradition is enduring of the ravages of journey, territorial decline, and distinctive peculiarity and; the tradition is able to withstand the possible absenteeism of droves of followers and symbolisms and objects that are important for the flourishing of the tradition. Traditions and cultural customs traveling into foreign lands have been a common

feature of migration (Vertovec 2000). These customs not only change the landscape of the foreign land they travel to but in the process undergo minor to major changes in their journeys as well. These changing features create new culturally distinct traditions that hold significantly different meanings for the practitioners of the traditions than they did in their domestic terrain. For example, a Hindu wedding while conceptually similar in its outlook could carry starkly different meanings when carried out on foreign soil. The families of the bride and the groom could insist upon following traditions not just to showcase their Hindu heritage but also to underscore that they as immigrants are as invested in cultural longevity as are their domestic brethren. Thus, to understand the change in rituals in the diaspora, one needs to have a thorough grasp of the already existing religious fluidity that Hinduism allows and perhaps more importantly of the insidious trend among laypeople to compare diasporic religious and cultural trajectories to the postulated religious and cultural archetypes that exist in the country of origin—Nepal. This latter statement, given its paramount importance in understanding change among the practitioners, is discussed more thoroughly below.

Archetypal Rituals

The common perception among diasporic populations to observe and mark the distinction in ritual practice in the diasporas and in the homeland leads to some erroneous understandings. Popular impression insinuates the authenticity of the original forms of rituals practiced in the homeland and also underscores the understanding that the practices in the diaspora are but facile efforts at mimicking the original. Socio-cultural changes are, therefore, always measured against this fictitious original, which in and of itself is always updating, changing, and transforming into something that is not the “original.” The changes that come about in the diaspora, as is apparent from the participants’ narratives, are considered adulterated versions of the original rituals.

Manju a 57-year-old who lives in the U.S. mentioned how families who leave their native land and settle elsewhere are believed to be tainted in some way—they share a common space with “beef-eating” people, they lose access to priests and temples and their ritual life becomes circumscribed. She narrated,

Now, how can we do everything like it was done there? Think about growing *jamara*⁴ here. Where would I even find it? The priest who did my little one’s naming rice-feeding ceremony didn’t even seem to know his verses correctly. So, it is difficult to make it all be the same. I try, I try a lot but it is not like having access to the priest in Kathmandu. It is not like running to your neighbors to ask for some item for the *puja*. So we have to try harder to be pure on the inside if we can’t do it on the outside. That is all we can do.

A great degree of internal effort and external coercion, therefore, goes into enforcing and policing the rituals to regulate them so as to maintain or revive their originality. If women are able to escape the policing from external agents, a degree of guilt at having forsworn the rituals in their authentic form regulates their narrative with rationales, justifications and excuses.

Another element of the homeland being considered the yardstick of measuring the authenticity and the legitimacy of the rituals is to ignore or overlook the creations of mini diasporas within nations that are organically adapting and changing the rituals and cultural traditions by way of adapting to the forces of modernity and globalization, which further leads to hybridization not very different than the type that occurs in diasporas. Thus, it becomes important to understand the role of the diasporic environment and its relation to religion and culture in shaping women’s understanding of menstrual rituals.

Religion as a Globetrotter

While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to chart the range of the religious transformation occurring in the Hindu diaspora, I want to outline the importance of the changes

⁴ *Jamara*: The stem of the barley plant, (4-8 inches long) which is offered as a blessing during the *Dasain* festival. Men are typically responsible for sowing the barley seeds.

in religion and ritual culture in the diaspora that are different from the ones occurring in the homeland. This effort in marking the globetrotting role of religion in the diaspora is a worthwhile investment in learning about ritual change and women's understanding of those changes. An understanding of the unique nature of Hinduism in its role as a globetrotting traveler will explicate the distinct ritual culture of the religion in the diaspora. Smart (1999) delineated that there are certain elements that constitute Hinduism that do not transfer well into foreign lands.

Among these are

themes such as caste, yoga, bhakti, pilgrimage, temple rituals, austerity (tapasya), wandering holy men, instruction in the scriptural traditions, regional variation, pundits, a strong sense of purity and impurity, household rituals, veneration of the cow, the practice of astrology, belief in reincarnation, the importance of acquiring merit, etc. These themes, which are woven together into the complicated fabric of Hinduism in India, do not all travel equally easily to new environments. (Smart 1999: 424)

This unique migratory quality of the religion makes the ritual culture slightly different than the one common in the homeland. This exclusive quality is further facilitated by the changing role of women in the diaspora. Women's changing capacities as wage earners in many cases or simply as entities who were trusted with more decision-making capacities means that their hitherto passive selves (by comparison) took a hiatus and welcomed the more active selves who were more engaged in community memberships in the diaspora communities (Willis and Yeoh 2000). More importantly so (for the purposes of this discussion) they also became more active in domestic religious practice (see Rayaprol 1997). Considering that international migration often tends to disrupt households in a variety of ways, it is important to note that women often play significant roles in mending the disruption because of their capacities to link the individual household to the community by way of religious or cultural bridges (Willis and Yeoh 2010). Further, if we factor in the fact that most migrating nuclear families leave behind traditional, aging parents, the diasporic space often becomes the first social sphere where the women truly

become the sovereign of the domestic arena (Willis and Yeoh 2000). Therefore, it becomes essential to scrutinize the diasporic element if we are to journal the transformation of ritual practice concomitant with the transformation of religion. The sections below help outline this process by paying close attention to the intergenerational and transnational aspects of the transformation of menstruation rituals.

Transnational Transfer of Menstrual Rituals

The conceptualization of a transnational transfer of menstrual rituals can help us understand how taboos are passed on from one geographical space to another and in the process how they form their roots, change their forms, and morph into taboos of different kinds. This model of transnational transfer of taboos has been adapted from Quinney's conflict theory of crime, a model that challenged the idea of a common, homogenous value system within society (Quinney 1980).

Menstrual taboos have been fixations in the Nepalese society since "the ages of the Gods," as a 34-year-old, mother-of-two interviewee, Drishti, so aptly put. These fixations have established firm roots as a result of stringent enforcements on the parts of the adult generations. With the decreasing importance of patrilineage, improving education, and with the advent of modernity and increased transnational dispersions among populations, the younger generation is making way for changes in these practices. The following section explains how a theory of menstrual taboos is formulated and sustained from one territorial context to the next.

Formulation of the taboos

As discussed in the introduction chapter, the mythic history of the taboos saw their inception in the religious text Rig Veda. In this text we find practices relating to the seclusion and restrictions of menstruating women explicitly linked to the mythic drama of Indra's slaying

of Vrtra (Chawla 1992). When Indra had slain Vrtra, a three-headed demon, he was seized by sin. To exculpate himself of the blame and the guilt, he transferred a third part of his guilt to women. Therefore, the guilt of the murder appears every month in the form of menstrual flow among women (Chawla).

Chawla writes that according to text, a menstruating woman should not anoint her body, bathe in water, touch fire, eat meat, and look at the planets. Also, the text advocates the menstruating woman to sleep on the ground (Chawla). Not surprisingly, given the stringent measures required of the menstruating women the teachings of the text have been adapted and observed by Hindu women worldwide.

The myth has served as a pedagogical tool that teaches the young the rules of a traditionally ritual-bound society. While the religious texts and the ancient law books no longer boast of numerical dominance regarding their readership, some of the messages encoded in the texts have carried well by word of mouth from one generation to the next. With some adjustments and modifications, the core of the rituals have stubbornly withstood the ravages of time and for centuries have been successful in underscoring the impure status of women during menstruation.

The reach of the ritualistic “how to” of menstruation rituals as depicted in the religious texts and the law books in the Hindu tradition is limited, as I have discovered in my conversations with Hindu women of Nepalese origin. With insufficient knowledge about the details of the rituals from the scriptures being transferred by the priests to women and women’s limited literacy restricting the analysis and the reinforcement of the rituals, many of the rituals in their original configurations have become mere symbols of customs of the yore. Other rituals have been transformed to practices that are practical to adhere to in the women’s respective

social scenarios. The insubstantial command the religious scriptures have on present day menstrual taboos does not, however, denote a religious truancy in the practice of the rituals. In fact, most women, often incorrectly, cite scriptures as their guidance for the observation of the menstruation practices in their current manifestations. In my interviews with women, the origin of the taboos in Indra's slaying of Vrtra repeatedly metamorphosed to the story of a Goddess menstruating for the first time to conquer her infertility. Thus, religion, in a contorted, inauthentic form often becomes a buttress for the rigorous performance of the taboos, for the slight alteration of the taboos, and for the total renunciation of the taboos.

In understanding how the practices established so long ago have sustained in today's world, we are able to identify the role of structural forces like the family unit, the community structure that is buttressed by expectations placed on men and women alike, and the bigger structure of religion that helps sustain the meaningfulness of traditions that many in today's world consider anachronisms.

Translocation of the rituals

The universality of the ritual practice around menstruation among Hindu women of Nepalese origin is unchanging. What is mutable is the forms these rituals take once they are translocated. I employ this term to describe the movement of the people observing the rituals and the changes that are incorporated in the rituals as a result of the move. The move could be a localized one, as in people moving from the more rural parts of Nepal to its more urban areas, or a more global move from the homeland to another country. While the former does not snugly fit in a chapter that discusses the diaspora, it suggests that the changes occurring are universal and makes it imperative that the nature of changes be observed with more scrutiny.

Local transformation

This variety of ritual refinement takes place in much subdued forms. When women get married and move residences to live with their in laws, they often adapt their rituals to acclimate to the new settings. Many women also see an increased change in ritual practice, when they move to more urban areas and take up jobs or begin to live in nuclear families. As for the subdued changes, these are indicated by minor adjustments in the observance of rituals. Suprina remembers how these changes crept up stealthily and steadily once she moved to the capital city of Nepal.

In the village, our house was built so that areas such as the kitchen and the prayer room were annexations of the main property and therefore almost a separate unit from the main house. It was possible for me to avoid the kitchen during the four days as long as the *diyo*⁵ was burning inside the prayer room. There was an additional dining hall that was bare with just a table and a few chairs. No one ate there. It was for the guests, no that many ever used it. They mostly ate in the kitchen. I just ate there during *nachune*. Now in the city we have a small dwelling where one room ushers us to another with the kitchen in the very middle. I now not only enter the kitchen to move about the house, I am now in the kitchen giving cooking lessons to whoever is available. It is often my daughter, very rarely my husband, and the little helper, Sani is always present. So, you see, now out of need you change what you used to do. And it does not make me feel bad that I am going against the rules. I know women here all do it this way. But when I have my own house I will make sure the architecture of it is slightly more convenient.

Pallavi, a 33-year-old worker in a big local bank in Kathmandu, introduced similar changes after she got married and moved in with her in-laws. Her narrative included unusual depiction of rituals that not many participants touched upon in their narrative.

This was one bizarre tradition my in-laws maintained, which even my tradition-bound husband was totally against. A menstruating woman could not touch the kitchen faucet. She was allowed to be in the kitchen, mind you, but now allowed to touch the faucet. You could touch the faucet in the terrace right outside the kitchen, but, no, not the kitchen faucet. My husband's mother had a weird story of how that ritual came to be. When the house was being constructed and they were adding additional floors to the building, she was using the kitchen downstairs. And when she let the water run from the faucet while she was menstruating, the water came out dirty with chunks of what she saw to be ...*chyaa* [eewww]... you understand what I am saying? So she thought this was a

⁵ *Diyo*: An oil-based lamp usually placed in front of idols after the morning and evening prayer.

message to stay away from the kitchen faucet. We also have another ritual of cleaning the plates and saucers we eat off outside the kitchen and drying them outside. The sun supposedly kills the germs. [Laughs] Never heard of this in my *maiti*⁶.

This account that Pallavi provides the evidence that underscores the nature of changing rituals in the homeland and therefore falsifies the commonly held understanding that the rituals in the homeland are unchanging and therefore original. In addition, unlike the changes commonly seen with global translocation the changes in the homeland can be bi-directional; not always demonstrating change that indicates the relinquishing of rituals but also showcasing change that moves toward more ritual stringency.

Global translocation

Global translocation occurs in two varying ways: the one taking place in social spheres that bear close resemblance to the country of origin and the one taking place in geographically and culturally foreign spheres. The first variety occurs in Bhutan and India and the second kind takes place in the U.K. and the U.S. The sections below will elucidate the differences in the two forms.

Translocation in Bhutan and India

The political and cultural climate of Bhutan and India influence the ritual observance in both these countries. Also influential is the proximity of both the nations to Nepal. One can conjecture that the territorial nearness and border sharing impacts the learning and dissemination of information related to tradition, culture and religion. The short journeys made to and fro by members of the diaspora help strengthen ties and also reinforce ritualistic connectedness. While the Nepalese in the nearby diaspora perhaps realize the differences in their cultural bearings because of centuries of socialization in different soils, they are also able to detect the similarities

⁶ *Maiti*: A Nepali word that denotes the wife's maiden home.

and reinforce the practice of traditional rituals that highlight these similarities. The narratives of the participants buttressed these suppositions and underscored the sameness in ritual practice in Bhutan and India even though the two nations are heterogeneous in their cultural, religious, and political bearings.

The highly localized renderings of the rituals in Bhutan and India are seen in rhetoric more so than in practice. This can be understood as legitimate means by the Nepalese in the diaspora to carve their own cultural uniqueness. Niva, a 38-year-old from the capital city in Bhutan, painted the following impression about the practice of menstruation by most Nepalese in Bhutan.

Everyone here does this special thing where they give up eating spicy food during their period. You know how we love our *khorsani* [Chilli] here. But we also have this belief that the chillies make all the dirt escape from the pores in our body thereby rendering us more polluted. So no chillies during the menses.

As fascinating and novel as this aspect of ritual practice was to me, I soon found out that this was Niva's individualized understanding of the spread of pollution, and none of the other women I spoke to mentioned about the chilly abstaining ritual on their own accord or acknowledged its existence when I brought up the topic. Similar individualized interpretations were evident among the Nepalese residing in India as well. Indira's account of her menarche emphasizes this trend.

When I had my first menses, ahh, it was so much fun. My mother brought me some books I had been wanting to read, she brought me food to my room, she rented so many wonderful movies. It was a sort of mini vacation for me. I told my friends about it and many of my *Bahun*⁷ friends were surprised by my experience, which unlike theirs had actually been fun. One friend, Rina spoke about her sister's first menses and how she had been locked in her room for 13 days. Wow! I would never have done that. My mother told me that these four days were set aside for me to learn more about my body and I took her word for it. I told many of my friends this and two of my friends actually got their mothers to do it exactly like mine. We went and visited them then and had slumber

⁷ *Bahun*: A person belonging to the Brahmin caste group

parties.

This trend of moving away from looking upon the initiation rite as secluded and understanding menarche as an experience with changing bodily functions was another conceptualization that was foreign to me. The ingenuity on the part of the mother, whether deliberate or accidental, was praiseworthy: the tradition of the ritual practices was being maintained while the intent was being given a new meaning. This again, however, was a story that was mentioned by two participants. While the participants mentioned that this movement was gaining traction among others of the newer generation, the stories were but anecdotal and the isolation practice during menarche in a slightly refurbished form was still popular.

Apart from the infrequent instances of these highly location-specific meaning-making experiments, there were many more instances where the actual translocation of the rituals was being carried out in full swing—women were entering into kitchens, women were cooking, some were even demarcating religious boundaries around altars. Given the presence of various ethnic groups that have no prescriptions around menstruation, many of the Nepalese in India and Bhutan had minimized the visual depiction of the more public aspects of the practices. Many women did not observe the proscription of avoiding physical contact with men who were not their spouses. Most women did not pay heed to the rule of avoiding being in close proximity of men and of avoiding sitting on the same piece of furniture where men were seated.

Uma frowned upon the commonality of such modified practices and clearly outlined how they were in the process of desecrating the Nepalese culture.

How much effort does it take to actually sit on a different sofa? And those women who are going the western way actually have the means and the resources to actually have a maid do the cooking, have a nice sofa put in the living room just for themselves, and have a separate room to sleep in during the menses. But I see women not following these rituals and it makes me sad. My daughter herself has begun revolting so I certainly see the demise of the Nepali culture as it stands. It is all the western ways; they are more

popular because they are easy. Follow the Nepali way and then be proud of it because then it would mean that it was difficult and you still did it.

Women who are giving up the practices, however, cite legitimate reasons for doing so. Geeta, a 35-year-old from the northeast corner of India, acknowledged that changing times had called for minor to major modifications of the rituals and she herself had to incorporate changes to suit the needs of her family. With the passing of her mother-in-law and the absence of the domestic help who attended the local public school during the day, she was often left to her own elements to take care of her toddler. She touched containers with dry food in them and had her own stock of drinking water and a small stove to cook for her son and for herself. While this wasn't a decision she particularly welcomed, she knew she had to make tough choices to attend to the needs of her family.

People in the diaspora tweaked their everyday habits, their ritual practices and their religious customs to suit the needs of their social landscape. With change being the one constant in the new social territory, adapting oneself to the changing landscape was done differently by different individuals. Thus, while the diaspora might be facing and withstanding similar challenges as the homeland, the simple fact that the diaspora exists in a different social and political terrain makes its challenges unique and the ensuing adaptations and modifications to the lifestyle of the dispersed population distinctive. Thus, it is important to note that similar changes in rituals in the homeland and the diaspora might indicate a similar pathway to change but might in actuality reveal an entirely different route to homologous outcomes.

Translocation in the U.K. and U.S.

This form of translocation is marked by the distinctiveness of the diaspora in its social, cultural, and religious make up. For the purposes of this study, we will look at the U.K. and the

U.S. and discern how the process of modifying rituals takes on a contrasting route from the process occurring in the diaspora in Bhutan and India.

The stark difference in the cultural landscape in the U.K. and the U.S. in comparison to that in Nepal suggests that the diaspora in the two nations face challenges in the upkeep of their tradition that are uncommon in the homeland and in the Indian and Bhutanese diaspora. The women often find themselves lacking the vocabulary to explain the intent behind menstruation rituals to the residents of the host nations. Although the participants of the study feel a sense of pride in carrying out tradition even in foreign lands, they also sense a degree of discomfort that the rituals bring about. Most of these challenges are explained by the distinct culture in the diaspora that makes little room for the observance of the rituals. One issue that is frequently mentioned by the participants residing in the two countries is regarding food preparation during menses. The increasing workload that the husbands take on to make a decent living in a foreign land, the lack of a network of female relatives who can help with the kitchen chores, and the shortage of resources that do not allow for families to obtain the services of domestic help, all impel the women to make the decision of doing away with important aspects of the rituals. Women now enter the domain of the kitchen to cook for their families. This major step also makes way for changes in other practices that now hold little meaning since the polluting powers of the menstruating woman is perceived as ineffectual or weakened in the face of economic practicality. Therefore, women in the two nations increasingly sleep with their husbands during menstruation by only instituting refrain from sexual contact.

Given the limitations discussed above what was possible to observe in the far away lands for the women living in the diasporas was the seclusion from the sacred. This carried different meanings for different women. With the changed roles as decision makers in the new land, they

decided for themselves what best constituted this seclusion. Nirmaya, a software engineer aged 28, said that her busy schedule dissuaded her from making trips to the temples so she refrained from going near the “pooja area” (the prayer area with idols and pictures of Gods and Goddesses within each home). Alka, a 35-year-old working woman, regulated her regular fasting days to have them not fall on days she would be menstruating. Rashi, a 42-year-old woman who followed the rituals very rigorously, gave her best effort to not even harbor thoughts about God during menstruation.

Thus, it so happened that the only form of menstrual taboo that was commonly practiced in the global diaspora was religious isolation. Once women migrated to the U.S. and the U.K., they dropped other forms of rituals; this happened gradually for some and more erratically for others. The abandonment of rituals was easier for younger women than for older women; an indication, perhaps, of how older women are strongly attached to tradition given their prolonged acquaintance and familiarity with it and the two generations of women having been raised and grown up in different eras with varying exposure to modernity and globalization.

Narrowing of the Rituals

Once women embark upon journeys that take them away from the homeland or find themselves in social environments that make translocating imperative, we find that the translocating of rituals leads way to the narrowing of rituals. The narrowing of rituals associated with the taboos should not however be considered as an overnight product in the making. With common societal variation compounded by individual disparities in how the rituals are molded and reproduced, the ritual tradition is the outcome of years of accidental alterations, intentional adjustments and inevitable adaptations.

In the process of making these modifications, women often adopt strategies, which fall between inadvertent tactics that are born because of necessity to machinations that employ forethought and planning. These practices dictate the preference of actual rules over prescribed rules. Sangeeta, a 43-year-old from the U.S., provided an excellent example of how women formulate their own rules that mirror prescribed rules in meaning but are very dissimilar in action. While the prescribed rules called for women to sleep away from the husband, most preferably on the ground, she modified the rule by sleeping on the same bed as her husband but by refraining from touching him during the course of the night.

The opinion that decreased ritual observance is essential for economic survival in the global diaspora provided the rationale for change for the majority of the women. Kalpana, a 34-year-old married woman from the U.S., reiterated several times in her interview that the rest period of menstruation often took that shape because she took the time to cook meals and freeze them for later. She narrated,

In the last couple of years... I don't know when I will get my period. Before, my breast used to feel tender but not anymore. It just comes and I am unprepared. So to avoid having my husband adjust schedules or take days off during my period, I just started cooking. I don't think many people in America can do this easily if women don't start cooking. And it is not such a big thing. I mean many of us would usually be bleeding on our 4th day, but we cooked then, didn't we?

The absence of extended family in those nations resulted in women having to give up some rituals, by choice or unwillingly, thereby narrowing the number of practices they could actually perform. The absence of an enforcer in the form of a vigilant society or a watchful mother-in-law also meant that the women now had the freedom to decide for themselves what practices they wished to observe and what practices they deemed impractical or nonsensical.

Junu, a married 33-year-old who had discontinued all forms of rituals with the exception of observing religious isolation remarked rather dryly, "I never wanted to observe the rituals

when I was back in Nepal, and I gave them up the day I left foot from the country.” Junu’s strain of thought reverberated in many other interviewees albeit more subtly. Anjali remarked that the practices made life uncomfortable for the very people it was supposed to protect: men. When men had to take up cooking out of compulsion the practices demanded modification, she said. From the interview transcripts it is clear that women often took on the pressure to modify rituals mostly because they felt that their husbands were working double shifts when they had to come home and take on the cooking chores. Thus was born the alteration of the rituals by weeding out the unnecessary and the impractical and holding on to the religious aspects that were less understood, and therefore, more fear inducing.

The narrowing of the rituals results in a hierarchical restructuring of the rituals. Toward the periphery are pushed the rituals that do not seem to have grave ramifications for being relinquished. These include physical contact with unknown men or with men who are mere acquaintances, physical contact with plants, and food proscriptions. Closer to the core are left the rituals that fall on ambivalent terrain—cooking for family members and maintaining physical contact with the spouse. Most women in the diaspora rationalize their ritual leniency and after much deliberation come to compromises that do not jeopardize their perception of who they are as religious beings. At the very core, and holding the highest merit among rituals, are those related to religious isolation. With little knowledge about the repercussions of violating the sanctity of religion, women make the pragmatic decision of following the rituals as they perceive to be proper to safeguard not just their quality of life during this lifetime but also those that are to follow.

Reconstructing the Ideology of Menstrual Rituals

The "production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness," is the closest Marx and Engels come to defining ideology, which they say arise as much from "historical life-process" as from "physical life-process" (1970: 47). Hall (1986: 28) defines ideology as "the mental frameworks, the languages, concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation, which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out, and render intelligible the way society works." Ideology, therefore, directs how we perceive ourselves and the world around us (Becker 1984: 69). It also dictates what we see as natural and obvious. Ideology also influences thought and serves to stabilize the belief of the masses, thus, often helping to reinforce their subordinate position.

Women use different methods to justify, make sense of, or rationalize the new forms of rituals, thereby reconstructing the ideology that is already in place. Because ideology is transient and takes on different meanings in different places and under different circumstances, women use variegated forms of arguments for having embraced altered forms of rituals to settle seamlessly into the diaspora. Among these is the argument that observing menstrual taboos jeopardizes the economic welfare of a family. Women claim that ridding themselves of the ritual that prohibited women from entering the kitchen to cook for the family helps in the successful functioning of the family.

In addition, women's narratives provided evidence for a marked change in the perception of the menstrual practices in relation to purity. While they reported to have perceived the taboos to be associated with ritual purity in the past they now professed to look upon them as measures to ensure cleanliness and hygiene among menstruating women. In fact Romila was very observant about this change in perception. She remarked, "When we see that nothing happens to men outside of Nepal and India when women touch them then we know that men aren't cursed

by our action. These rules were for the past when women were actually dirty during their period. Now we have ways to be clean.” This shift in argument helps form the ideology of the changed nature of the sacred, from a concern with ritual purity and fear of pollution (Douglas 1966:147) to a concern with hygiene.

Most women recognize that in the absence of a vigilant society that closely watched their moves, they are now immersed in a society where the older generation that regulated these practices is either entirely missing or weak in strength to make its voice heard. Therefore, they understand their changing roles as keepers of tradition. As a result, most women still choose to observe religious isolation as a mark of respect to the Hindu society at large. Sushmita, a 35-year-old who lived in the Southwest of the U.S., remarked about how she could not give up all practices because she looked upon herself as a keeper of the Nepalese tradition. She further added that women always felt that added pressure to carry the weight of upholding cultural values and observing these rituals was one way that depicted how women were taking an active role in becoming the keepers of tradition and upholding their identity in a foreign environment.

Having left behind extended families, women now have a say over what they believe is the pragmatic practice to mark the period of menstruation; many look upon past practices as anachronism in today’s society. However, the ideology that dictates that women are impure during menstruation still has strong roots among them. Of the 45 women I interviewed in the diaspora, only six of them did not take an active part in isolating themselves from religious activities. Some identify this as a way of being keepers of the Hindu tradition. Others seem afraid of the idea of defying God by defying the taboo related to religious worship. Having voiced these reasons for clinging on to this form of taboo, women collectively declared that they considered their bodies to be impure during menstruation. Thus, no matter the differences in rationales in

modifying taboos, women in the diaspora and the homeland routinely voice their fears and concerns about violating the norms of religious purity. The one message that is almost ubiquitously offered by women, whether in the diaspora or in the homeland, has strong hints of patriarchal influence still embedded deep in the psyche of the women. It, therefore, seems that despite best efforts to alienate themselves from the values that the older generation believed in, women still cater to a similar ideology they are trying so hard to deny. This reconstruction of ideology, which for some is in fact the reconstructing and reaffirming of the old ideology, helps women make sense of their roles as modern, educated women keeping up with western women in the western world while safeguarding their ethnic, religious selves.

Intergenerational Transfer of Rituals

Another essential element that deserves special attention regarding the transfer of rituals is that related to the transfer of rituals intergenerationally. As chronicled in previous chapters, mothers, grandmothers, aunts, mothers-in-law and various other female members in the extended family play important roles in teaching young girls and women the particulars of ritual behavior, the importance of abiding by the rituals, and the consequences of violating the rituals. Therefore, it is important to understand how the process unfurls and how it impacts the continuance of the rituals.

Knowing that the core meanings of the rituals have endured, we can presume that many women practice individual renderings of the rituals to satisfy the older generation. Sometimes even when the old practices are still alive, some younger women observe them not only out of religious fervor or devotion but also out of deference to the respected elders who have strong beliefs about the taboos around menstruation. Dhara, a middle-aged woman from Nepal, makes a deduction that rings very true when we seek to identify the history behind the practices. She says

that the practices have been so interwoven into the fabric of society that the young have no option but to emulate them. She adds that the teachings from one generation to the next continue smoothly with subtle changes with changing times without bringing about a rupture in the system.

The importance of the presence of an older generation in the community is made apparent when we observe the narrowing of rituals occurring in generational leaps, more so in the diaspora than in the homeland. With “legitimate” rationales in place for abandoning the practices as discussed in the previous sections, women from the younger generations are more likely to modify or abnegate certain practices. While this phenomenon occurs in the homeland in more muted forms, the shape it takes in the diaspora is regulated by prescribed niches in the fields of localized display of globalization, local cultural traditions, local religious politics, and the like. Manavi’s description below elucidates the phenomenon well.

When we moved here, my mother-in-law came along. She was old and had no one to take care of her in Kathmandu. I am among the most thankful daughters-in-law for her presence. She would help with everything around the house. Given my busy work schedule, I, menstruating or not, would not have to do anything at home. I had stayed so far from household duties that once when *Tihaar*⁸ fell on the first day of my period, I accidentally almost participated in the religious function. I was not trying to lie or deceive anyone about it; I had just completely forgotten. The culture of the place [the U.S.] is such that it makes you forget so easily. Only then did I realize that I had been too hard on my daughter when I had scolded her for all the things her grandmother pointed out she didn’t do. She was in a place where all forms of Hindu influence was missing and I expected her to be interested in our culture? Once we moved away from Kentucky to a place where there were more Nepali people, then she learned things without me trying to force her into them. My mother-in-law always frowned at the simplicity of the rituals and the plain appearance of our tradition but that was ours and we had made it the way it was in this land where none of it existed before.

⁸ *Tihaar*: The festival of lights within which are housed the celebration of Goddess Laxmi: The Goddess of Wealth and *Bhai Tika*, which entails women and girls praying for the long life and safety of their brothers.

The generational acceptance and understanding of the rituals in the diaspora are rendered obvious in the account above. The older generation still basks in the glory of what used to be; the younger generations, depending on where they lie on the age spectrum, either try and revive what is left of their culture or struggle hard to find meaning in traditions that are as distant and detached from them as is their native land. This youngest age group after attaining maturity often finds a middle path that balances its indifference with a level of inquisitiveness that often helps its members understand their ethnic, religious, and diasporic identity better and make their parents and grand-parents relieved.

An intergenerational trend in the U.S. and the U.K. that was surprising and perplexing was one where the daughters increasingly showed interest in observing rituals. This occurred despite the fact that daughters were rarely made to isolate themselves during menarche as doing this would entail missing valuable school time. In addition, they were mostly only taught to isolate themselves from religious activities. However, pre-pubescent daughters often exhibited an ardent desire to participate in the rituals. Mothers recounted how their daughters would ask curious questions about the meaning of the rituals and waited in great anticipation for their first period. Mothers also often speculated as to why such a shift was happening and five of them mentioned the fascination these girls might have with puberty and the unique ways in which their culture celebrated or marked this occasion. This could have been regarded as a distinctive way for them to differentiate themselves from the rest of their classmates and friends who had no “cool practice” to mark their entry into young adulthood. Of the ten mothers who spoke about this trend, seven had had daughters take up all aspects of the rituals seriously in the beginning but eventually resigned themselves to just religious isolation given what they often rationalized as the impracticality of the rituals. Given that most of these mothers were modifiers, the

daughters had learned of the practices not from having seen them carried out but from the stories they had learned about the practices from the mothers. This marks a stark effort on the part of the daughters to carve out an identity different from their mothers' with regard to the stringent ritual practice. Despite its failure in gaining momentum, the pseudo-shift—where the daughters attempted to practice the menarche rituals, where they practiced isolation from the kitchen, avoided physical contact with men, and practiced all forms of religious isolation but then paved a way for abbreviation of rituals on most occasions or complete relinquishing of rituals—might be an indication of how women in the diaspora will increasingly see themselves as keepers of culture, thereby changing the culture of menstruation in foreign lands and altering the culture of menstruation itself.

Roles of Men in Ritual Modification

When I first sought permission from the Internal Review Board for carrying out research among Nepalese women residing in multiple nations, I had also requested for and had been granted approval to interview men. As the scope of the project expanded, so did the workload, and the few interviews that I had of men were put in storage as viable research material for future analysis. As I began data analysis, however, I soon realized that the voices of men were not just discreetly present in the women's narratives but were gesticulating wildly, entreating my attention.

In understanding men's roles in women's ritual modification, it is also important to know of the existence of rituals that are specific to men. The Hindu society until not too long ago was teeming with ritual activity in all phases of a person's life cycle. Secularization in the Hindu community saw its inception with British influence and the influence of the educated Western elite (Jayapalan 2001). This resulted in a quick increase in the compression and truncating of

rituals especially men's rituals related to the first tonsure (head shaving) and the yearly changing of the sacred thread for the Brahmins and the Chettris (Jayapalan 2001). The sacred thread ceremony as initiation rites for Brahmin and Chettri boys is also increasingly being carried out in their adulthood. Given that the wearing and the yearly changing of the sacred thread is meant for the protection of the boys and men, the marked decrease in these rituals indicate that fear of harm through ritual non-observance is not considered grave or consequential. This creates an interesting juxtaposition—men are less involved in their own ritual practices even when those supposedly protect them. So what would their stance be when women are renouncing rituals that were also meant to protect men? This conundrum is far from answered with the data of this study. However, it is an important element to keep in mind when examining men's involvement or the lack thereof in women's ritual modification.

Before we pay heed to what the voices of men proclaimed, it is also essential that we understand how men stand in a situation where the rituals are being modified in the diaspora. What often happens when nuclear families establish homes in new lands is that ritual practices of all kinds are adapted to suit the new environment. Families first have to set themselves up as a functioning unit with jobs or vocations, get the children initiated in the new community, establish friendships and then slowly begin to learn about the new ways of the new social environment. After ascertaining the new social sphere, families then initiate participation in public manifestation of ethnic rituals. During this period, an active effort to understand what is considered acceptable and what is encouraged in this realm is also being carried out by various members of the family. However, decisions about household rituals are left to individual households to resolve. Manisha, a 45-year-old social worker in the U.K., found this initial settling in period to be challenging.

The nearest temple was in the city nearby that was a train journey away. There were about 15 Nepali households in the town we were living in. Ours had always been a religious family. We would start every task, every function by a visit to the temple. Move into a new apartment, go to the temple. The start of Biju's [her son] pre-school, visit the temple. So we were left lost during the first few months. After we told ourselves to be satisfied with the prayer area in our apartment we were faced with the issue of me walking around this area during my period. I still had to go to the kitchen to eat and do the dishes so it became difficult to avoid the area. Then I found out from my neighbor that she had begun cooking for the family during her menses soon after they moved to England. Her husband, she remarked, was a horrible cook. I was appalled by the idea and talked to my husband about it. He didn't seem too affected and said that it actually made sense.

Manisha's narrative although illustrative of the learning process highlights another important aspect of ritual observation—her husband seems to be welcoming of the idea of ritual adaptation when she herself seemed to be initially appalled by it. When we pay attention to how this modification benefits him, the answers are telling. He does not have to involve himself in household duties he has never had to do in his entire life. His time is best served if he is engaged in tasks where his expertise supersedes his wife's. By intimating so, he is also tacitly able to ascertain that cooking and cleaning are women's tasks; women are not only better at it but they also have been trained in that sphere. Most importantly, perhaps, the association of menstrual rituals in protecting him from any harm or lethargy seems to be considered either a myth or not accounted for at all. The latter possibility, while a common scenario among the younger generation, did not always serve as a justification among most men as was made apparent in many women's narratives.

It is important to note in this context that the avoidance of rituals in the face of the move is not just beneficial for women, but for men as well. With their partners being fully active in cooking activities during menstruation, men's roles as temporary cooks during the period is rendered nonexistent. Their concealed support for women resuming activities related to cooking and their added support for women sleeping in the same beds as themselves hints at the new

rituals being beneficial for men. This tacit approval that men routinely provide to their wives after the move to a foreign land speaks to the important role of men in ritual change.

Kavita's conversation with her husband about the letting-go-or-not-letting-go of the prohibition around cooking while at work has been discussed in a previous chapter. This stance seems to be recurrent among the three women who had in some aspect or another worked in the food industry. As a worker whose very source of employment structured around cooking or being around food, all of them had practical reasons for letting go of the practices. The religious side of them, however, was not convinced that they were not doing anything wrong when they were handling food that many men ate during menstruation. Their decision-making was made easier by consulting with their spouses who encouraged their abandoning of the ritual. Therefore, it is apparent that in subtle forms men still have a say in how the rituals are conducted. That Kavita's husband did not provide any alternative solutions to her proposal and just stayed quiet also intimates that men are amenable to modifications that make their lives comfortable.

When making the decision to abstain from certain rituals, Aakriti, a 28-year-old, sought her husband's approval. When he did not show much concern about what she thought to be a major step in her route to becoming an impious individual on account of his well-being, she was taken aback. His understanding of the rituals gave her solace and helped her comprehend better the exact purposes of the rituals.

He told me that the practices were in place so that the women in old times would not accompany the husbands while hunting because the smell of blood would attract animals. They were told to stay in a room and not come out of there. The stories around protecting the men came from the fear of wild animals being attracted to the smell of menstrual blood as indication of food being nearby. We both laughed about how there are no wild animals around these days, at least not near our homes, and after he explained it to me that way it made sense. He says that to be faithful to God, I could just avoid going to temples. That was all I needed to do to be a devout person. I haven't told my mother-in-law but I have told my mother and she thinks I will somehow harm him.

While the question still lingers about the husband's genuine belief in the account he provided or the rationale of his argument, what is clear from the above excerpt is that men themselves have ways of making meaning of the rituals and also of the modification of rituals. That he urges his wife to abstain from some rituals while he still encourages her to show her dedication to God could be because she herself wants that connection to God or that he is aware that if he took the element of religious isolation away from menstruation rituals the rest of the rituals that he has convinced his wife are old-fashioned will be reintroduced into her practice. Thus, for the sake of authenticity he could be motivating her to believe in the religious facet so that the other features could be let go without the wife having a cause for concern.

Nirja, a 29-year-old from the U.K., believes that the rituals in their current form are but remnants of the age-old tradition. They serve as a reminder of what they stood for—regulators of women's ritually impure bodies—while evoking memories of women's subordinate status in society. I was curious to know what her husband thought of the practices and if he held similar beliefs. Although she speaks of her husband's ideas very briefly in her interview, the short excerpt provides an illuminating window into the younger generation's perspicuity and ingenuity in engaging in meaning making exercises that are beneficial to them and at the same time allow for a flexible, more-trendy form of Hinduism to bloom and flourish.

My husband and I have had several conversations about this. The Hindu religion never was a despotic structure with stringent rules. The followers always had the leeway to weave it and mold it anyway we liked. The rituals from the past were fit for that day and age and the rituals we have abandoned, refashioned, or reinvented are as legitimate as the ones in the past were. We don't have to go to temples on a Sunday to show our religious bearings, we bring the temples within us and cleanse our inner contamination first before we even get to the list of elements that have been considered dirt in the past.

Both Nirja and her husband brush upon the widely discussed belief that Hinduism is an entity that is vastly different from other world religions in a number of ways.

There is no single, central, or basic creed, doctrine or dogma from which all religious traditions of India derive.... In relation, there is no scripture that is authoritative for the mass of Indians or for all periods of history, and no central ecclesiastical body holds parallel authoritative position. Ritual practice, especially, represents a sphere entailing a vast range of difference with regard to focus, intent, and actual undertaking (Vertovec 2000: 8).

This delineation of Hinduism by Vertovec provides a purview in terms of how Hinduism has developed in India but also captures well the essence of how it has been accepted among the Nepalese population as well. The absence of the authoritative religious figure or a text of similar standing has made the practice of Hinduism more of a self-conscious development process in an individual who also has the freedom to learn from community promulgated beliefs. This variety of Hinduism is making a comeback in the diaspora especially among younger people like Nirja and her husband. With the husband having a fluid understanding of what the rituals mean, Nirja's opinion vis-à-vis the rituals should hold traction among her in-laws should that situation of altercation ever arise.

As important as the current role of men in influencing the observance or transformation of rituals surrounding menstruation taboos in the diaspora, the role of the patriarchs and the priestly class in establishing the rituals as strongholds in yesteryears have to be acknowledged as well. The narratives of women clearly indicate the historical significance of men's involvement in the regulation of rituals. This becomes even more noteworthy when we consider that in the modern times men have had very little participatory role in the monitoring of menstruation rituals. Smriti acknowledges the occurrence of this phenomenon.

In the old times, the village headmen, the priests, the head male in the family, all of them spoke out clearly against those women who did not practice the rituals correctly. Umm, they were tied very strongly to the home and were very busy with their own rituals in the home. That meant they were around women in the house when they had *nachune*. Today all of that is gone. I think, I mean, men go to work. They are in the home only at night. Women are told by their mothers, mothers-in-law, their grandmothers to do the right thing.

Menuka, the oldest participant from my sample at 86 years old and also the one with the most engaging stories of the past, had elucidating examples of the changing role of men in the regulation of rituals in the household domain.

I was 13, yes, I must have been 13. Keep in mind, I was married already. Yes. During those days, they married us early. My father-in-law, he was the head priest in the temple, you know the one right down your father's home, yes, that one. I told my sister-in-law about my bleeding. She fetched my mother-in-law who immediately took me to the servants' quarters and made a make shift sleeping corner for me. All this was done quietly, I don't know why because everyone in the house would know about it eventually. But that is how she did it. Later that night, my father-in-law walked into the courtyard that separated the main house from the servants' quarters and with great dignity pointed out a list of things I could not do and should not do. Divided into two parts—could not do and should not do. My mother-in-law had just told me to lie in bed and had handed me a handful of rags. My father-in-law explained about my changing role in the family now. I was reminded that, you know, I could now have babies and I better get started on that project soon. That was then. With my daughter-in-law, when she came as a bride she was 22. [Laughs]. She knew what she had to do and I told her a few things here and there. Just as a reminder, you know. My husband, he stayed some distance away from the topic. I think he doesn't want me to go to the kitchen when I am this old when she is *nachune*. He almost makes me think that he feels that as long as we don't pay attention to their deficit in ritual practice and our son and daughter-in-law bring us good food, in our old age we shouldn't ask for more.

By underscoring the role of generation based regulatory measures and generational differences in the control of the domestic sphere on the performance of the rituals, this chapter highlights why understanding the taboos through a religio-cultural lens is important in deciphering the changes or rigidity in menstrual practices. This necessitates a shift away from looking at the universality of taboos and concomitantly the seemingly plausible universality of the origin of these taboos and a move toward a more culture-centric awareness of the meanings of the taboos. Menuka's account also clearly depicts the powerful presence of a regulator in the form of a man in the old days, a presence more consequential than a woman's. This was so because when men had a say about a domestic issue, it carried more weight than a woman's word. They were, after all, the true heads of households. This domineering presence, as has been chronicled by Menuka and as

was mentioned by many other participants, has dwindled steadily. Perhaps, this has resulted in a climate that has fostered modification of rituals by women who are more attuned to the needs of the family and their own bodies and therefore are making decisions that create room for alterations while keeping the core of the rituals alive.

The sections above illustrate how men's voices, although muted and materializing in the background, still have a say in how the rituals are carried out. While this would be expected given that the rituals seek to protect them from debilitating outcomes because of improper contact with women who are in their impure state, men's stance seem to focus more on the practical aspects of the observance of the rituals. Their primary concerns seem to hover around issues of economic stability, proper functioning of the family, their personal ease and very little focus seems to be put on their physical virility and performance. This trend occurring in the diaspora also hints toward the changing perceptions of younger men in their changed roles as the heads of their households. Therefore, the familiar absence of the older generation in the global diaspora and to some extent in the local diaspora as well (with younger households living in nuclear families), seems to have rerouted a share of decision-making role to the men again. While this is draped in the fabric of women making joint decisions about menstruation rituals with their spouses, it still showcases that what was considered the missing element—men's supervisory performances—in the regulation of the rituals was, in fact, present all along. It was implementing its recommendation in many cases and pronouncements in many others by remaining in the background.

Conclusion

Analysis of the changes in menstrual taboos provides insight on how a ritual or traditional practice is passed across generations, how compliance with ritual is monitored, and how the

domain is changed in the process. The transformations are a product of negotiations between Nepalese women in the diaspora and their changing lifestyle as they attempt to make sense of and respond to challenges while reshaping the ideologies of the taboos.

While some may argue that the changes associated with the move from Nepal to the U.S. and the U.K. with regard to menstrual taboos seem particularly progressive with many of the stringent measures lifted, this chapter frames how the changes are not only an indication of growing agency in the hands of women but also a demonstration of the ways in which women redefine the meanings of the taboos based on the collective notions, ideas, and beliefs that reflect the moral position of the society. In the process of making meaning of the changing taboos, women have reformulated ideologies often with the help of their spouses to fit the frame of the few taboos that are still in place. What is important to note is with hygiene taking up the realm that was once occupied by the sacred and women recognizing their roles as tradition keepers, taboos still hold central meaning in the lives of these women even in their altered forms.

This chapter makes room to understand further about the intergenerational conflict between the younger generation that has moved to the diaspora and the older generation that either visits from time to time or is a small minority in the diaspora. The tug between the three generations for continued observance of the taboos, on the one hand and making way for doing away with the taboos on the other hand, is ongoing. Further understanding the association of the different generations with relation to changing taboos could also open doors to new line of inquiries regarding the role of the diaspora in influencing these changes, the migratory qualities of the taboos and rituals in local journeys in comparison to global ones, and finally the interesting elements displayed by the youngest generation in their pendulous interest regarding the ritual component of menstruation.

Chapter VII

CONCLUSION

Menstruation for most women is a monthly occurrence that signifies their reproductive capacities. The range of emotions it brings along is individualized within the framework of the local landscape in which women reside. Some look upon it as a habitual occurrence, others associate it with pain, either pre menses or during menses, and some embody the corporeal discomfort through mental anguish. Some look at the agony the cultural manifestation of the physical phenomenon brings along and yet others simply accept the phenomenon as a mundane bodily function regulated by cultural standards. These scenarios highlight the elaborate range of sentiment that the cultural portrayal of this phenomenon generates.

In the Nepalese context, the rituals Nepalese girls and women observe around menstruation are manifold. Women refrain from cooking, entering areas of religious worship, being in physical contact with adult males including their spouses (Bennett 1976; Kandel et al., n.d.). In addition, tradition requires that they not touch plants for fear that the menstruant might pollute and kill the plants, milk cattle so as not to bleed them to death, eat nutritious food like milk, yogurt and butter (Kandel et al., n.d.). In its extreme form menstruation rituals entail that women are cordoned off in temporary housing structures that are deemed as menstrual huts where they is often no running water, no electricity, and the structures themselves are shabbily built and thus pose dangers from wild animals and inclement weather making women's stay in the huts uncomfortable if not intolerable (Shrestha 2012).

Given the seemingly rigorous nature of rituals around menstruation, it seems very probable that women in such societies would welcome the advent of less-stringent rituals and would readily modify the rituals to simpler forms if presented with such an opportunity.

However, even though women themselves seem to have regulatory powers over the observance of rituals and take on the responsibility of teaching young girls about them, they are not very keen on abnegating all forms of the rituals that easily. Women's relationship with the rituals are complicated by the often contradictory elements of traditional expectations and the underpinnings that modernity tags along. While on the one hand, culture and tradition are heralded as important markers of identity and thus expected to be preserved, the ease and simplicity of molding the culture to fit the needs of present times are equally, if not more, enticing. This is further complicated with increasing migratory practices and with the full-fledged explosion of globalization. Given the pull women face from each of these opposing elements, ritual manipulation and change have become mainstays in the lives of the women. This dissertation outlined how women understand, manage, and come to terms with the travails of menstruation rituals juxtaposed amidst the realms of elements like patriarchy, religion and culture and showcased the need to understand the phenomenon of menstruation as a pantheon, inclusive of the elements mentioned above and more.

The introductory chapter outlined how menstruation rituals among Hindu women of Nepalese origin serve as a case study for a deeper understanding of women's agency in patriarchal societies and the changing role of patriarchy in traditional cultures in contemporary times. Operating as a primer in introducing the social configurations of the phenomenon of menstruation, the chapter also described the historical origins of the rituals, their inventory in religious texts and the current form in which most Nepalese women practice menstruation rituals. This chapter was then followed by a thorough introduction of the study sample and the methods used in the data collection process. The chapter also listed some of the methodological issues encountered during various stages of the study and how I resolved or attempted to resolve them.

To further situate the rituals in women's social lives and delineate their significance, the third chapter outlined the meaning making approach adopted by Nepalese women in understanding their menstrual identities. The chapter expounded on the requisites of being adherents, modifiers, or abnegators based on women's understanding of whether they fully embraced menstruation rituals, modified them, or renounced them respectively.

Chapter four problematized the purity-pollution dichotomy that is often used to understand menstrual rituals and elucidated how menstruation in the Nepalese context can only be understood with a full comprehension of menstrual pollution as a unique variety of pollution, the nature of the rituals that help overcome the pollution as adjustable and non-rigid and the ensuing purity as distinctive in what it delineates. The chapter emphasized the need to better comprehend the purity-pollution continuum in understanding the endurance of menstruation rituals.

With a clear understanding of the uniqueness of menstruation as a form of pollution, the fifth chapter then examined women's adaptive measure toward a new route for religiosity that allows room for strategies, meaning making exercises and denouncements of rituals while being devout individuals in their varying social settings.

The important phenomenon of the transfer of menstruation rituals whether transnationally or intergenerationally was examined in chapter six. By exploring the transfer and change of culture and tradition in Nepal and the Nepalese diaspora, chapter six provided an overview of what tradition means in the host nation versus what significance they hold in the diaspora and of the different ways in which the rituals evolve from one generation to another and one geographic area to the next.

Through these chapters it is apparent that the managing of menstruation rituals as a sub-conscious performance clearly exemplifies a delicate yet masterful balance-striking act that women have administered proficiently in their respective social spheres. This management also seems to have become a mainstay among women of Nepalese origin as they traverse new social, geographical and religious spheres. The ritual management also typifies the transformation of menstrual rituals over space and time. Given the expanse of the dissertation findings in the areas of culture, religion, and ritual studies, in this closing chapter I locate the empirical contributions of the study and make recommendations for future research in the field of menstruation ritual studies.

Empirical Contribution

Insidious Forms of Patriarchal Control

As was made apparent in the first chapter, the grips of patriarchy are riveting and multifarious. The dominion of patriarchal control, therefore, is not as simple as the patriarchal head holding sway over all decision-making thereby enabling the modus operandi of patriarchy to be straightforward. Its complexity is highlighted by the societal claim of the end of or diminishing of patriarchy (see Edstrom et al. 2014) or even its reversal (see Kelbert and Hossein 2014) while its operation is vehemently corroborated by the oppressed. Therefore, the patriarchal machinery, in today's day and age has become a well-oiled machine that appears seemingly benign, non-existent even, while concealing the long-armed reach of the institution that has been established and embedded so deeply in the constitution of the societal fabric that it has become almost undetectable.

An ingenious way in which this age-old reach materializes is by bestowing decision-making powers onto women regarding practices and customs that if not performed well would

come to harm men. One such practice surrounds the ritual around menstruation. Women, as established by mythology, have enormous polluting powers vis-à-vis men . They can make them sick, weak and can even render them foolish causing them to make imprudent decisions (Manu IV, 41; Buhler, trans.). Logistically speaking, these are undesirable sanctions to sustain, given that men are not even carriers of pollution. Had they generated the contaminants that changed their physiology for the worse then the sanctions would have been palatable; they, however, are not. For women, therefore, to bear the burden of sequestering themselves seems only fair. Thus, the elaborate ritualistic treatment to alleviate the side effects of the polluting powers of menstrual blood is expected and so is the responsibility falling on women to regulate themselves with propriety in the observance of the rituals. The strong ties to religious beliefs add the final regulative touch that substantiates the consequences of violating the rituals. The logic behind this form of patriarchal perpetuation can be better understood by perusing Lerner's (1986) definition of patriarchy. In defining patriarchy and talking about how the dominance that arises out of patriarchal power is masked or its repercussive effect is alleviated, she writes, "The relationship of a dominant group, considered superior, to a subordinate group, considered inferior, in which the dominance is mitigated by mutual obligations and reciprocal rights. (275)" The definition captures well how a system as oppressive as patriarchy serves to not just survive but thrive in today's societies. It functions on power that is "non-authoritarian, non-conspiratorial, and indeed non-orchestrated" (Bordo 1995: 262). While this is Bordo's rendering of Foucault's definition of modern power, it captures succinctly patriarchy's undetectable brilliance.

Patriarchal perpetuity in the realm of menstruation management can also be examined by identifying the roles of various players in establishing and cultivating the rituals. While the responsibility to manage the establishment and continuity of the rituals seem to have fallen on

men in the past, women have now taken on that duty with gusto. The reason/s for the shift's occurrence can only be surmised: men perhaps showed good performance in instilling the importance of the ritualistic behavior and therefore did not need to be active in the regulation once the norm was established; alternatively or in conjunction, given the personal nature of the biological phenomenon, women could have taken over the reins of managing the rituals to save the shame that both men and women must have waded through to have a conversation over the ritualistic nature of the taboo topic. Whatever the reasons, men's roles in the realm of managing the rituals around menstruation have diminished.

These changing roles nevertheless do not imply men's absence in the pronouncement of ritual modification. While the Nepalese society depends greatly on women for the promulgation of rituals and tradition their roles are also limited to simply carrying out the rituals. The creation, the initial regulation, and the subsequent transformation of the rituals materialize only with men's overt authorization or some form of circuitous endorsement (See Smith 1992). This is reflected in the direct and roundabout ways women solicit and obtain men's approval.

The patriarchal tradition also tends to survive longer in some circumstances and flourish and thrive in others when the ritual directives are delegated to women to regulate and oversee (Florence 2013). With the enforcer now changing attire, the regulation of the rituals loses its touch of patriarchal recognition. The new enforcer gives the nature of the rituals and the purpose behind the rituals a new meaning—a set of practices regulated by women and carried out by women and girls for the sake of religious, tradition-based and culture-oriented propriety.

This helps give birth to the strongly linked triple helix constituted by religion, tradition, and a subdued form of what Kandiyoti (1988) calls classic patriarchy. The three components work in collaboration and one helps feed and ground the others. Patriarchy becomes ennobled in

the auspices of tradition and religion, and the hallowed qualities of tradition make some unpalatable religious doctrines agreeable. Religion also helps strengthen tradition by giving legitimate meaning to hackneyed and antiquated social norms. This tandem arrangement signals that the rituals, especially the ones practiced by women, are not seeing their untimely demise anytime soon.

New literature in the field of patriarchy has now carved room for new and subtler forms of patriarchal domination that still serve to benefit men (see Galman 2013; Majstorović and Lassen 2011) and other forms that sit at the opposite end of the spectrum and antithetically reverse the privileges for men (see Kelbert and Hossein 2014) or deny the reach of patriarchy in structural processes that usually serve to subordinate women (see Seshu and Pai 2014). Given that patriarchy, despite claims to the contrary, permeates the lives of many, considering it as a site of analysis is essential in a study that analyzes women's rituals; it highlights the process of gendering that occurs with different impacts on different groups of women living across the globe. It is also important because patriarchal influence is easily shrouded under the guise of gendered differences (not inequality), religious tradition and cultural convention as was made apparent in the preceding chapters. The new form of invisible patriarchy while tangentially brushed upon by scholars (Walby 1990) has not received the attention that overt forms of patriarchy receive. This unfortunate oversight is brought to light in this dissertation by highlighting the role women play in legitimating a custom that most consider antiquated, the role men play by visibly intervening or subtly interposing themselves in women's decision making about ritual negotiation, and the role religion takes in supplanting patriarchy's apparition and hence its infamous name and conveniently rendering the nature of the rituals hallow. By underscoring the very invisibility that has allowed patriarchy to thrive, this dissertation brings to

the fore the ways in which the rituals have taken the guise of being designed for women, by women and having received the endorsement of women.

Ritual Culture Seeing No Untimely Death

With the advent of the modern era, scholars have predicted and prophesied the demise of practice of many rituals with only their meanings being remembered (Wulf 2003). While the trend is certainly visible in most cultures, the demise of rituals is sometimes conflated with the modification of rituals. This occurrence of this inaccurate designation can be seen in the practices of Nepalese women regarding the transformation of rituals. In this population, the most egregious forms of pollution are not just regarded seriously by many but their ritualistic treatments are carried out in full fervor: this can be seen in the still popular practice of isolation of women in menstrual huts during menstruation and the isolation of the women and the new born in similar dwellings post pregnancy. In the Nepalese context, the religious sequestration that occurs among menstruants and women post-partum, highlights that ritual management is still the prevailing convention used to isolate the pollutants from divinity. Over the course of time, what or who is considered divine and pure has unquestionably changed among the devotees. This hierarchical divergence of ritual behavior is often misinterpreted as demise of ritual undertaking, which is but occurring in transformed capacities.

Another occurrence that gives a misrepresentation of the undoing of the ritual culture is the declining ritual practice among men. Given that men's practices, both textually and behaviorally, invoke more interest, a steep decline in their practice draws more attention. In contrast, women's ritual practice are often marked as a given and only in recent times have they drawn the interest of scholars even though women's ritualistic roles in domestic rituals in the Vedic era and in the contemporary era have been clearly documented (Leslie 1992). Their ritual

identity as a mark of their roles as good wives, good mothers and good women provide good incentive to adhere to their individualized understanding of the rituals; that the largely heterogeneous, non-text book variety of Hinduism allows for this undertaking makes the rituals more accessible and worth pursuing. With women taking on the burden of carrying the heritage of their culture on their shoulders, men have increasingly ventured into fields that remove them from domesticity and its various churnings of ritual life (Srinivas, 1966). Therefore, what seem to be ritual denouncements among women are in fact ritual transformations and are an indication that ritual culture, a mainstay of many religious undertaking will not see the steady demise that has been purported in the popular media repeatedly.

Menstruation rituals' strong link to religion also makes its shelf life prolonged. In classification systems that are hierarchically bound by gender and based on religious doctrines, the transformation of rituals encompassing the doctrine also denote a reconfiguration of gendered behavior. This reconfiguration always occurs in the realm of the changing façade of religion. Therefore, women's current roles are valorized as culture carriers, devotees, overseers of tradition and the transformed ritual practice as symbols of women's changed capacities ensure the observance of the rituals—in slightly transformed capacities perhaps, but definitely emanating the mark of a Hindu woman who inheres cultural orthodoxy while embracing the challenges modernity brings along.

Purity and Pollution and How it Informs the Changing Religious Ritual Landscape

While there is no dearth of studies that focus on the purity-pollution component of menstruation, a more holistic analysis of the purity-pollution continuum needs to be carried out for understanding what the changing nature of purity implies and what the repercussions of this changing nature heralds for our understanding of pollution and religious observance. This

exercise also imparts more meaning in understanding menstruating individuals as wavering between the “not quite” or “not at all” impure individuals given Nepalese women’s distinct comprehension of menstruation rituals, complicated relationship with menstrual blood, and a fluid understanding of the clause intrinsic to the *Rishi Panchami* festival. The novel endeavor to delineate fully the labyrinth nature of the purity-pollution continuum is drawn out in chapter four, which clearly outlines the uniqueness of menstrual blood in the Nepalese context and the need for more thorough theorizing of the changing forms purity and pollution to be comprehensive about the complexity that is menstrual blood.

This brings us to the importance of understanding of purity-pollution in menstruation rituals as a tandem that then informs how religious rituals are managed, which then illustrates how new phenotypical religiosities are created. The evolution of religion has been well documented (Feierman 2009; Voland and Schiefenhovel 2009) and there is mounting evidence to suggest that adaptive forms of religiosity are also being identified in the literature (for e.g., see Marti 2010, Steele 2011). This study provides evidence to show that adaptive forms of religiosities are not just being co-opted by religious institutions as has been depicted by Marti (2010) and Steele (2011), not just by priests (see Srinivas 2006) but by devotees as well. This latter notion has been introduced in the scholarship (see Avishai 2008; Hartman 2007) and is generating interest given that the ubiquitous nature of change has impacted all denominations of faith.

Given that people’s cognitive ability to believe in God has been established, for this belief system to hold traction the cultivation of ritual behavior is a requisite (Purzycki and Sosis 2013). The nurturing of ritualized behavior, in turn, tends to the “adaptive religious system.” In other words, ritual behaviors and religious beliefs exist in a feedback loop in which behaviors

affect beliefs and beliefs affect behaviors’ (Purzycki and Sosis 2013: 103). This, in essence, captures the central thesis of the concept of adaptive religiosity.

Furthermore, the understanding of adaptive religiosity also allows for the acceptance of the transformative escapades of rituals in diasporic settings. Given that scholarly analysis of rituals has mostly been in their natural setting (Werner 2012), this dissertation takes the ritual out of its natural habitat and examines it in a foreign environ. By doing so, we are allowed foray into understanding the portability of not just religions, an assignment accomplished by many in the field of diaspora and religion, but also that of rituals. This provides room for the examination of how rituals are naturalized in diasporic settings and the legitimation function that process of naturalization plays in validating immigrant identities, gender identities, kinship patterns, religious import, and cultural significance; this study has taken the formative steps in the exploration of what could be an important arm in the field of migration studies—ritual portability in the diaspora.

Recommendation for Future Research

The need for reframing our current understanding of menstruation rituals is essential for three important reasons: First, menstruation rituals are changing rapidly providing us a glimpse into the future of rituals that are increasingly considered unbecoming and ill-suited for the changing world. Second, the changing façade of menstruation rituals are reflective of the changing relationship between religion, tradition, and culture—a triadic unit made more complicated by modernity and its recurring clashes with the triadic unit. Third, the situating of rituals in the midst of the murky terrain of patriarchal agency needs to be carried out to sculpt a clear outlook of contemporary rituals. Thus, to reformulate the conceptualization of the meaning of menstruation rituals, women’s voices regarding the observance of the rituals need to be

brought to the fore. With more importance given to women's voices, we are able to ascertain how women understand and manage their menstruation identities, how they make meaning of the changing nature of rituals, and perhaps we even have a window into speculating what the nature of the rituals will look like in years to come. This effort to capture only women's voices however is also incomplete. A more thorough grasp of the changing nature of the practices could have been gathered had my sample of participants included men. Men's voices, while scattered in women's narratives, are still not fully present to assert with certainty the varying nature of patriarchal power still at play in regulating menstruation ritual transformation. Including them in the study will further bolster some of the assumptions made in this particular study.

A possible rewarding diversion in the current study could be made by conducting interviews among girls in the U.S. and U.K. diaspora and their unexpected excitement about not just the menarche rituals but the succeeding monthly isolation rituals as well. This inclination among this set of young adults hints at the different socializing elements at work in the global diaspora—elements all together absent in the homeland and the local diaspora. By drawing attention to the differences between the girls in the far-away diaspora and the girls in Nepal, the process of cultural reconstruction or cultural appropriation can be better understood. The questions regarding, “are girls revitalizing the capital of their culture and religion in foreign ritual settings?” and “what does this cultural appropriation indicate if it is temporary?” can be answered by drawing participation from youth of Nepalese descent.

Another element that could have added richness to this endeavor is by including more participants from rural areas of Nepal that still continue the practice of isolating women in menstrual huts. The menacing presence of a civil war in the nether regions of Nepal hindered my plans of venturing into those areas. Future research should definitely benefit in capturing the

voices of those women who practice the rituals in the most unabridged form of what was spelled in the religious texts than is observed by Nepalese women anywhere in the world.

Finally, a good comparative platform that is readily available in the form of the Jewish diaspora needs to be utilized to compare differences and similarities that might paint a clear picture about the role of migration, tradition-specific gender dynamics, and generational influence in the transformation of rituals. Because the Jewish menstruation culture is fairly similar to the Nepalese one, this comparison study might very well be able to encapsulate the changing trends in settings that are truly cross-cultural and diverse.

Conclusion

This dissertation provided an overview of how women understand the menstrual phenomenon, what the changing nature of menstruation rituals signify to them, how they ground themselves in this changing culture, how they hold their religious identity that is strongly linked to their menstrual identity intact, and how they understand the rituals even when they are renouncing their practices steadily. These processes are different for different individuals but the procedure each woman undergoes in situating herself in her social surroundings and deciphering for herself what ritual is right for her and what rituals she cannot observe anymore is a deliberate, calculated tread that helps her orchestrate the social apparatus to fit the settings of her individualized social domain. This study further opens avenues to understanding menstruation taboos as a deviation from various kinds of dichotomies like purity and pollution, empowerment and oppression, and life affirming and death inducing phenomena thereby creating space for interpreting menstruation not as a stand-alone phenomenon but as intertwined with social institutions like religion, politics, and culture.

By underscoring the influence of religion and culture on the performance of the taboos, this study highlights why understanding the taboos through a religio-cultural lens is important in deciphering the changes or rigidity in menstrual practices. This necessitates a shift away from looking at the universality of taboos and concomitantly the seemingly plausible universality of the origin of these taboos and a move toward a more culture-centric awareness of the meanings of the taboos. For a society that has strong ties to its cultural and religious identities, the reliance on the religious and cultural definitions to explain certain phenomena is expected. However, in this realm of the anticipated, is also positioned the unanticipated: women's dependency on the very structures of religion and culture to proffer reasons, some valid, some concocted, and many more floating waveringly between the two, for adhering to and deviating from the taboos. This study illustrates how careful consideration of the voices of the women highlights underlying structural configurations of various social processes that outwardly hint at how the taboos could be oppressive while covertly suggesting that the consequences of the taboos are culturally and individually variable and complex.

REFERENCES

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. 2002. "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and its Others." *American Anthropologist* 10(3):783-790.
- Adhikari, Pratik, Simkhada, Padam P, Teijlingen, Edwin and Raja, Amalraj E. 2008. Health and lifestyle of Nepalese Migrants in the U.K. *BMC International AIDS and Human Rights*. 8(6). Retrieved April 11, 2014 (<http://www.biomedcentral.com/1472-698X/8/6>).
- Adler, Patricia and Peter Adler. 1987. *Membership Roles in Field Research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Adler, Patricia and Peter Adler. 1995. "Understanding and Evaluating Qualitative Research." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 57:879-893.
- Afshar, Haleh. 2008. "Can I See Your Hair? Choice, Agency, and Attitudes: The Dilemma of Faith and Feminism for Muslim Women Who Cover." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31(2):411-27.
- Ahmed, Sara. 2000. *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Postcoloniality*. London, U.K.: Routledge.
- Akin, David. 2003. "Concealment, Confession, and Innovation in Kwaio Women's Taboos." *American Ethnologist* 30(3):381-400.
- Allen, M.R. 1967. *Male Cults and Secret Initiations in Melanisia*. Victoria: Melbourne University Press.
- Avishai, Orit. 2008. "'Doing Religion' in a Secular World: Women in Conservative Religions and the Question of Agency." *Gender & Society* 22(4):409-433.

- Bartky, Sandra. 1988. "Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power," Pp. 61-86 in *Feminism and Foucault: Paths of Resistance*, edited by Lee Quinby and Irene Diamond. Northeastern University Press.
- Becker, H. S. 1958. "Problems of Inference and Proof in Participant Observation." *American Sociological Review* 23:652-660.
- Becker, S. 1984. "Marxist Approaches to Media Studies: The British experience." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 1(1):66-80.
- Bell, Catherine. 1997. *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Bennett, Lynn. 1974. *Pregnancy, Birth, and Early Child Rearing*. Kathmandu, Nepal: HMG of Nepal/UNICEF.
- Bennett, Lynn. 1976. "Sex and Motherhood among the Brahmins and Chhetris of East-central Nepal." *Journal of the Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies*. Special Issue, Contributions to Nepalese Studies in Anthropology, Health, and Development.
- Bennett, Lynn. 1976. "The Wives of the Rishis: An Analysis of the Tij-Rishi Panchami." *Kailash* 4(2):185-207.
- Bennett, Lynn. 2005. "Gender, Caste and Ethnic Exclusion in Nepal: Following the Policy Process from Analysis to Action." World Bank, Washington.
- Bentor, Yael. 2000. "Interiorized Fire Rituals in India and in Tibet." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 120(4):594-613.
- Bergeron, Suzanne. 2001. "Challenging the World Bank's Narrative of Inclusion." Presented at the Allied Social Science Associations meetings, New Orleans.

- Bergesen, Albert James. 1978. "Rituals, Symbols, and Society-Explicating the Mechanisms of the Moral Order." *American Journal of Sociology* 83(4):1012-1021.
- Bettelheim, Bruno. 1954. *Symbolic Wounds. Puberty Rites and the Envious Male*. New York: Free Press.
- Biale, David. 1997. *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America*. London: University of California Press, Ltd.
- Biale, Rachel. 1995. *Women and Jewish Law*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Biernacki, Patrick and Dan Waldorf. 1981. "Snowball Sampling: Problems and Techniques of Chain Referral Sampling." *Sociological Methods and Research* 10(2):141-163.
- Blystad, Astrid, Ole Bjorn Rekdal, and Herman Malleyeck. 2007. "Seclusion, Protection and Avoidance: Exploring the Metida Complex among the Datoga of Northern Tanzania." *Africa* 77(3):331-350.
- Bonaparte, Daly. 1953. *Female Sexuality*. Translated by John Rodker. New York: International Universities Press.
- Bordo, Susan. 1995. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Bordo, Susan. 1999. "Feminism, Foucault and the Politics of the Body." Pp. 246-257 in *Feminist Theory and the Body*, edited by Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Bucar, Elizabeth M. 2010. "Dianomy: Understanding Religious Women's Moral Agency as Creative Conformity." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78(3):662-686.
- Buckley, Thomas. 1982. "Menstruation and the Power of Yurok Women: Methods in Cultural Reconstruction." *American Ethnologist* 9:47-60.

- Buckley, Thomas and Alma Gottlieb, eds. 1988. *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Buhler, Georg. 2004 (1882). *The Sacred Laws of the Aryas Part II*. Kessinger Publishing.
- Buhler, Georg. 2009 (1886). *The Laws of Manu*. Bibliobazaar.
- Burke, Kelsy. 2012. "Women's Agency in Gender-Traditional Religions: A Review of Four Approaches." *Social Compass* 6:122-133.
- Chawla, Janet. (1992). "The Rig Vedic Slaying of Vrtra: Menstruation Taboos in Mythology." *Manushi* 68:29-34.
- Cicurel, Inbal and Rachel Sharaby. 2007. "Women in the Menstruation Huts: Variation in Preserving Purification Customs among Ethiopian Immigrants." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 23(2):69-84.
- Cochran, David Carrol. 1999. *The Color of Race and Freedom: Contemporary American Liberalism*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press
- Cohen, Robin. 1997. *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. London: UCL Press.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 1991. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge.
- Daley, C.D. 1950. "The Psycho-Biological Origins of Circumcision." *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 31:217-236.
- Delaney, Carol. 1988. "Mortal Flow: Menstruation in Turkish Village Society." Pp. 75-93 in *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation*, edited by Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- DeVault, Marjorie L. 2000. "Talking and Listening from Women's Standpoint: Feminist Strategies for Interviewing and Analysis." *Social Problems* 37(1):96-116.

- Dick, Hilary Parsons. 2006. "What to do with 'I Don't Know:' Elicitation in Ethnographic and Survey Interviewing." *Qualitative Sociology* 29(1):87-102.
- Dixit, Kanak Mani. 2001. "Bahuns and the Nepali State." *Nepalitimes.com* October 2001. Retrieved April 11, 2014. (<http://nepalitimes.com/news.php?id=7182>).
- Douglas, Mary. 1966. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. New York, NY: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.
- Douglas, Mary. 1973. *Natural Symbols*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Dunnavant, Nicki C. and Tomi-Ann Roberts. 2012. "Restriction and Renewal, Pollution and Power, Constraint and Community: The Paradoxes of Religious Women's Experiences of Menstruation." *Sex Roles* 68:121-131.
- Durkheim, Emile. 1963. *The Nature and the Origin of the Taboo*. Translated by Lyle Stuart. New York: NY: Lyle Stuart.
- Dutton, Edward Croft. 2006. "Ritual, Taboo and Political Protest." *Mankind Quarterly* 47(1/2):41-59.
- Elson, Jean. 2002. "Menarche, Menstruation, and Gender Identity: Retrospective Accounts From Women Who Have Undergone Premenopausal Hysterectomy." *Sex Roles* 46(1/2):37-48.
- Engels, F and Karl Marx. 1970. *The German Ideology*. New York, NY: International Publishers.
- Faist, Thoman. 2010. "Diaspora and Transnationalism: What Kind of Dance Partners?" Pp. 9-34 in *Diaspora and Transnationalism* edited by Rainer Buobock and Thomas Faist. Amsterdam University Press.
- Foucault, M. 1991. "Governmentality." Pp. 87-104 in *The Foucault Effects: Studies in Governmentality*, edited by G. Burchell, C. Gordon, and P. Miller. University of Chicago Press.

- Fraser, Nancy. 1992. "Introduction." Pp. 1-24 in *Revaluing French Feminism: Critical Essays on Difference, Agency and Culture*, edited by Nancy Fraser and Sandra L. Bartky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1950. *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement Between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, Trans. James Strachey. New York. Norton.
- Fuchs, Stephan. 2001. "Beyond Agency." *Sociological Theory* 19(1): 24-40.
- Gallagher, Sally. 2007. "Agency, Resources, and Identity: Lower-income Women's Experiences in Damascus." *Gender & Society* 21:227-49
- Garcia, Alma M. 1997. *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings*. New York: Routledge.
- Gaston, Annie Marie. 1992. "Dance and the Hindu Woman: Bharatnatyam re-ritualized." Pp. 149-170 in *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*, edited by Julia Leslie. New Delhi: Shree Jainendra Press.
- Gautam, Gunanath. 2013. "Impact of Bhutanese Refugees in Eastern Nepal." Paper Presented at History Association of Nepal, March 2-3 2013, Birathnagar, Nepal.
- Gerschick, T. and A. Miller. 1994. "Gender Identities at the Crossroads of Masculinity and Physical Disability." *Masculinities* 2(1): 34-55.
- Goffman, Erving. 1961. *Asylums*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.
- Goldstein, Melvyn C. and Cynthia M. Beall. 1986. "Family Change, Caste, and the Elderly in a Rural Locale in Nepal." *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 1(3):305-316.
- Grewal, Inderpal and Caren Kaplan, eds. 1994. *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Griffith, R. Marie. 1997. *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*.

- Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Grimes, Ronald, ed. 1996. *Readings in Ritual Studies*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Grahn, Judy. 1993. *Blood, Bed, and Roses*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Gross, E. 1986. "Conclusion. What is feminist theory?" Pp. 190-240 in *Feminist challenges: Social and political theory*, edited by C. Pateman and E. Gross. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Gubrium, J.F. and J.A. Holstein. 2003. *Postmodern Interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gustafsson-Larsson, Susanne, Britt-Marie Thurén, Lars Dahlgren and Göran Westman. 2007. "Bun-baking Mums and Subverters: The Agency of Network Participants in a Rural Swedish County." *Women's Studies International Forum* 30(1):48–58.
- Guterman, M. A., P Mehta, and M. S. Gibbs. 2008. "Menstrual Taboos among Major Religions." *Internet Journal of World Health and Societal Politics* 5(2).
- Hall, S. 1986. "The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without guarantees." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10:28-44.
- Hasrat, Bikram Jit. 1980. *History of Bhutan: Land of Peaceful Dragon*. Thimphu: Education Department.
- Haraway, Donna. 1988. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14(3):575-599.
- Harding, Sandra. 1998. *Is Science Multicultural: Postcolonialisms, Feminisms, and Epistemologies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Harvey, Graham, ed. 2005. *Ritual and Religious Belief: a Reader*. London: Equinox, and New York: Routledge.
- Hartman, Tova, and Naomi Marmon. 2004. "Lived Regulations, Systemic Attributions:

- Menstrual Separation and Ritual Immersion in the Experience of Orthodox Jewish Women.” *Gender & Society* 18:389-408.
- Hegland, Mary. 1998. “The Power Paradox in Muslim Women’s Majales: North-West Pakistani Mourning Rituals as Sites of Contestation over Religious Politics, Ethnicity, and Gender.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 23(2):391-428.
- Hinnels, John R. 1997. “Comparative Reflections on South Asian Religion in International Migration.” Pp. 819-847 in *A New Handbook of Living Religions*, edited by John R.Hinnel. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 1979. “Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure.” *American Journal of Sociology* 85:551-575.
- Hoskins, Janet. 2002. “Blood Mysteries: Beyond Menstruation as Pollution.” Special Issue of *Ethnology* 41(4): 299–301.
- Hurtado, A. 1999. “Disappearing Dynamics of Women of Color.” Working Paper no. 4. Boston: Center for Gender in Organizations. Simmons Graduate School of Management.
- Islam, Naheed. 2007. “Research as an Act of Betrayal: Researching Race in an Asian Community in Los Angeles.” Pp. 471-484 in *Just methods: An Interdisciplinary Feminist Reader*, edited by Alison Jaggar. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers.
- Jacobs, Janet. 2002. *Hidden Heritage: The Legacy of the Crypto Jews*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Jaggar, Alison, ed. 2007. *Just methods: An Interdisciplinary Feminist Reader*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers.
- Jayapalan, N. 2001. *Indian Society and Social Institutions*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers Distribution.

- Johnston-Robledo, I. and Joan C. Chrisler. 2013. "The Menstrual Mark: Menstruation as Social Stigma." *Sex Roles* 68 (1-2):9-18.
- Kahn, Morton. 1931. *Djuka: Bush Negroes of Dutch Guiana*. New York: Viking Press.
- Kandiyoti, Deniz. 1988. "Bargaining with Patriarchy." *Gender & Society* 2(3):274–290.
- Kandel, N., A. Rajbhandari, and J. Lamichanne. (n.d.). "*Chhue, Chahaupadi and Chueekula Pratha*"—*Menstrual Sheds: Examples of Discriminatory Practices against Women in the Mid-and Far-western Regions of Nepal: Considering Women as "Impure" or "Unclean" During Menstruation and Post-partum Periods*. Retrieved April 11, 2014 from (<http://drnirmal.tripod.com/Journal1.pdf>).
- Kaser, Karl. *Patriarchy after Patriarchy: Gender Relation in Turkey and in the Balkans*. LIT Verlag Münster.
- Katel, Nararyan. 2008. "Matters of Ethnicity." Pp. 159-162 in *The Fleeing People of South Asia*, edited by Shibaji Pritam Basu. New Delhi: Anthem Press.
- Keshet-Orr, J. 2003. "Jewish Women and Sexuality." *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*. 18:215–224.
- Kharrazi, Lily. 1980. "State of Separation: Syrian Jewish Women and Menstruation." *National Women's Anthropology Newsletter* 4(2):13-14.
- Kohli, Manorama. 1996. "Ethnic Crisis in Bhutan: Implications." Pp. 92-99 in *Bhutan: Society and Polity*, edited by Ramakant and R.C.Misra. New Delhi: Indus Publishing.
- Kissling, E. A. 2006. *Capitalizing on the Curse: The Business of Menstruation*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.
- Knauss, Peter R. 1987. *The Persistence of Patriarchy*. New York, NY: Praeger Publishers.
- Knight, Chris. 1991. *Blood Relations*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

- Lambek, Michael. 1992. "Taboo as Cultural Practice among Malagasy Speakers." *Man* 27(2):245-266.
- Laws, S. (1990). *Issues of Blood: The Politics of Menstruation*. London: Macmillan.
- Lee, J. 2009. "Bodies at Menarche: Stories of Shame, Concealment, and Sexual Maturation." *Sex Roles* 60:615–627.
- Leslie, Julia, ed. 1989. *The Perfect Wife*. Great Britain: Oxford University Press.
- Leslie, Julia, ed. 1992. *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*. New Delhi: Shree Jainendra Press.
- Levi-Strauss, Claude. 1969. *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Boston: Beacon press.
- Levine, Nancy. 1987. "Caste, State, and Ethnic Boundaries in Nepal." *Journal of Asian Studies* 46(1):71-8.
- Lewis, Reina and Sara Mills, eds. 2003. *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. New York: Routledge.
- Loomba, Ania. 2003. "Dead Women Tell No Tales: Issues of Female Subjectivity, Subaltern Agency and Tradition in Colonial and Postcolonial Writings on Widow Immolation in India." Pp 241-262 in *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Reina Lewis and Sara Mills. New York: Routledge.
- Mahmood, Saba. 2001. "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival." *Cultural Anthropology* 16(2):202-236.
- Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Project*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Majstorović, Danijela and Inger Lassen, eds. 2011. *Living with Patriarchy: Discursive Constructions of Gendered Subjects Across Cultures*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

- Malinowski, B. 1948. *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*. Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press.
- Marti, Gerardo. 2010. "Ego-affirming Evangelicalism: How a Hollywood Church Appropriates Religion for Workers in the Creative Class." *Sociology of Religion* 71(1):52-75.
- Marvasti, Amir. 2006. "Being Middle Eastern American: Identity Negotiation in the Context of the War on Terror." *Symbolic Interaction* 28(4):525-547.
- Mathew, Joseph C. 1999. *Ethnic Conflict in Bhutan*. New Delhi: Nirala Publications.
- McCormack, William. 1967. "Purity and Danger: Analysis of Concepts of Purity and Taboo." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 6(2):313-314.
- McHugh, Ernestine. 2002. "Encountering the Forest Man: Feminine Experience, Imaginary Others, and the Disjunctions of Patriarchy in Nepal." *Ethos* 40(1/2):77-94.
- Meacham, Tirzah. 1995. "An Abbreviated History of the Development of the Jewish Menstrual Laws." Pp. 23-39 in *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law*, edited by Rahel Wasserfall. Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press.
- Meggitt, M.J. 1970. "Male Female Relationships in the Highlands of Australian New Guinea." Pp. 125-143 in *Cultures of the Pacific*, edited by Thomas G. Harding and Ben J. Wallace. New York: Free Press.
- Miller, Pavla. 1998. *Transformations of Patriarchy in the West, 1500-1900*. Indiana University Press.
- Mir, Shabana. 2009. "Not too 'College-Like,' Not too Normal: American Muslim Undergraduate Women's Gendered Discourse." *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 40:237-56.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 1988. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial

- Discourses.” *Feminist Review* 30:65–88.
- Moghadam, Valentine M, ed. 1966. *Patriarchy and Development: Women’s Position at the End of the Twentieth Century*. Clarendon Press.
- Montgomery, Rita. 1974. “A Cross-cultural Study of Menstrual Taboos, and Related Social Variables.” *Ethos* 2:137-170.
- Murphy, Robert. 1959. “Social Structure and Sex Antagonism.” *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 15(1):89-98.
- Murphy, Sheigla and Marsha Rosenbaum. 1999. *Pregnant Women on Drugs: Combating Stereotypes and Stigma*. Rutgers University Press.
- Naples, Nancy N. 2003. *Feminism and Method: Ethnography, Discourse Analysis, and Activist Research*. New York: Routledge.
- Narayan, Uma. 2000. “Essence of Culture and a sense of History: A Feminist Critique of Cultural Essentialism.” Pp. 80-100 in *Decentering the Center: Philosophy for a Multicultural, Postcolonial and Feminist World*, edited by Uma Narayan and Sandra Harding. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Narsimhan, Haripriya. 2011. “Adjusting Distances: Menstrual Pollution among Tamil Brahmins.” *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 45(2):243-268.
- Nisa, Eva. F. 2010. “Embodied Faith: Agency and Obedience among Face-veiled University Students in Indonesia.” *Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 13(4):366-381.
- Owen, Lara. 1993. *Her Blood is Gold*. United Kingdom: HarperCollins Publisher Ltd.
- Parekh, Bhikhu C. 2000. *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*. United Kingdom: Macmillan Press Ltd.

- Pederson, Lene. 2002. "Ambiguous Bleeding: Purity and Sacrifice in Bali." *Ethnology* 41(4):303-315.
- Powers, Marla N. 1980. "Menstruation and Reproduction: An Oglala Case." *Signs* 6(1):54-65.
- Preston, Jesse Lee and Ryan S. Ritter. 2012. "Cleanliness and Godliness: Mutual Association between Two Kinds of Personal Purity." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 48:1365-1368.
- Purzyckia, Benjamin G. and Richard Sosis. 2013. "The Extended Religious Phenotype and the Adaptive Coupling of Ritual and Belief." *Israel Journal of Ecology and Evolution* 59(2):99-108.
- Quinney, Richard. 1980. "Conflict Theory of Crime." Pp. 86-91 in *Constructions of Deviance*, edited by Patricia A. Adler and Peter Adler. Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Radcliffe-Brown, Alfred R. 1922. *The Andaman Islanders*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- Rappaport, Roy. 1999. *Rituals and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- Rayaprol, Aparna. 1997. *Negotiating Identities: Women in the Indian Diaspora*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Rose, Gillian. 1997. "Situating Knowledges: Positionality, Reflexivities and Other Tactics." *Progress in Human Geography* 21:305-320.
- Rubin, Herbert and Irene Rubin. 2012. *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*. Sage Publications.
- Rustad, Harley. 2013. "Nepalese Menstruation Tradition Dies Hard." *The Globe and Mail*. Retrieved February 27, 2014 (<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/nepalese->

[menstruation-tradition-dies-hard/article11644844/](#)).

Salime, Zakia. 2008. "Mobilizing Muslim Women: Multiple Voices, the Sharia, and the State."

Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East 28:200–211.

Saraf, S. 1969. "Hindu Ritual Purity-Pollution Complex." *The Eastern Anthropologist* 22(2):161-175.

Seigelshifer, Valeria and Tova Hartman. 2011. "From Tichels to Hair Bands: Modern Orthodox

Women and the Practice of Head Covering." *Women's Studies International Forum*

34:349-359.

Seshu, Meena Saraswathi and Aarti Pai. 2014. "Sex Work Undresses Patriarchy with Every

Trick!" *IDS Bulletin* 45(1):46-52.

Sharma, Babu Madhavprasad. 1966. *Rishi Panchami Vrata Katha*. Dudhi Vinayak Varanasi-1.

Shrestha, Rubeena D. 2012. "The Time of the Month." *Nepali Times*. Retrieved February 26,

2014 (<http://nepalitimes.com/news.php?id=19199>).

Shuttle, Penelope and Peter Redgrove. (2004). *The Wise Wound: Menstruation and Every*

Woman. New York: Marion Boyars Publishers.

Singer, Milton and Bernard S Cohn, eds. 1968. *Structure and Change in Indian Society*.

Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.

Smart, Ninian. (1999). "The Importance of Diasporas." Pp. 420-429 in *Migration, Diasporas and*

Transnationalism, edited by Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen. Aldershot: Edward

Elgar.

Smith, Frederick. 1991. "Indra's Curse, Varuna's Noose, and the Suppression of the Woman in

the Vedic *Srauta* Ritual." Pp. 17-45 in *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*, edited by

Julia Leslie. Great Britain: Farleigh Dickinson University Press.

- Smith, Jonathan Z. 1978. "The Bare Facts of Ritual." *History of Religions* 20:112-127.
- Spivak, Gayatri. 1990. *The Postcolonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogue*. New York: Routledge.
- Sprague, Joey. 2005. *Feminist Methodologies for Critical Researchers: Bridging Differences*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Srinivas, M.N. 1966. *Social Change in Modern India*. Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press
- Srinivas, Tulasi. 2006. "Divine Enterprise: Hindu Priests and Ritual Change in Neighbourhood Hindu Temples in Bangalore." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 49(3):321-343.
- Steele, Liza. G. 2011. "'A Gift from God': Adolescent Motherhood and Religion in Brazilian Favelas." *Sociology of Religion* 72(1):4-27.
- Stephens, Williams. N. 1961. "A Cross-cultural Study of Menstrual Taboos." *Genetic Psychology Monographs* 64:385-416.
- Stewart, Angela P. and Andrew Strathern. 2002. "Power and Placement in Blood Practices." *Ethnology* 41(4):349-363.
- Stein, Arlene. 2009 "'As Far as They Knew I Came from France': Stigma, Passing, and Not Speaking about the Holocaust." *Symbolic Interaction* 32(1):44-60.
- Steiner, Franz. 1956. *Taboos*. London: Penguin Press.
- Stephens, Williams. N. 1961. "A Cross-cultural Study of Menstrual Taboos." *Genetic Psychology Monographs* 64:385-416.
- Torab, Azam. 1996. "Piety as Gendered Agency: A Study of Jalaseh Ritual Discourse in an Urban Neighborhood in Iran." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*

2(2):235–252.

- Taylor, Dena. 1988. *Red Flower: Rethinking Menstruation*. Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press.
- Ulrich, Helen E. 1992. “Menstrual Taboos Among Havik Brahmin Women: A Study of Ritual Change.” *Sex Roles* 26(1/2):19–40.
- Upreti, B.C. 1996. “The Nepali Immigrants in Bhutan: Growing Conflict Between National and Ethnic Identities.” Pp. 78-91 in *Bhutan: Society and Polity*, edited by Ramakant and R.C.Misra. New Delhi: Indus Publishing.
- Vail, Lise F. 2002. ““Unlike a Fool He is Nor Defiled: Ascetic Purity and Ethics in the Samnyasa Upanishads.”” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 30(3):373-397.
- Valenta, Marko. 2009. “Immigrants’ Identity Negotiations and Coping with Stigma in Different Relational Frames.” *Symbolic Interaction* 32(4):351-371.
- Vavrus, Mary D. and Joashua Gunn. 2010. “Regulating the Postfeminist Pharmacy.” Pp. 112-133 in *Governing the Female Body: Gender, Health, and Networks of Power*, edited by Lori Reed and Paula Saukko. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Vertovec, Steven. 2000. *The Hindu Diaspora: Comparative Patterns*. London: Routledge.
- Voland, Eckart and Wulf Schiefenhovel, eds. 2009. *The Biological Evolution of Religious Mind and Behavior*. New York, NY: Springer-Verlag.
- Walby, Sylvia. 1990. *Theorizing Patriarchy*. Great Britain: T.J. Press Ltd.
- Wasserfall, Rahel, ed. 1995. *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law*. Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press.
- Weideger, Paula. 1977. *Menstruation and Menopause: The Physiology and the Psychology, the Myth and the Reality*. New York: Delta.
- Wengraf, Tom. 2001. *Qualitative Research Interviewing*. London: Sage.

- Werbner, Pnina. 2012. "Migration and Culture." Pp. 215-244 in *Oxford Handbook of the Politics of International Migration*, edited by Marc R. Rosenblum and Daniel J. Tichenor. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- West, Candace and Don H. Zimmerman. 1987. "Doing Gender." *Gender and Society* 1(2):125-151.
- Westbrook, Larel and Schilt Kristen. 2014. "Doing Gender, Determining Gender: Transgender People, Gender Panics, and the Maintenance of the Sex/Gender/Sexuality System." *Gender & Society* 28(1):32-57.
- Williams, Raymond Brady. 2004. *Williams on South Asian Religions and Immigration*. Cornwall, U.K.: MPG Books Ltd.
- Willis, Katie and Brenda Yeoh, eds. 2000. *Gender and Migration*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Willis, Katie and Brenda Yeoh. 2000. "Gender and Transnational Household Strategies: Singaporean Migration to China." *Regional Studies* 34(3):253-264.
- Woliver, Laura R. 2008. *The Political Geographies of Pregnancy*. University of Illinois Press.
- Wulf, Christoph. 2013. "Religion and Rituals." Pp. 25-37 in *Culture and Education*, edited by Birgitta Qvarsell and Christoph Wulf. Waxman Publishing Co.
- Yalman, Nur. 1962. "On the Purity of Women in the Castes of Ceylon and Malabar." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 93(1):25-28.
- Young, Frank W. and Albert Bacdayan. 1965. "Menstrual Taboos and Social Rigidity." *Ethnology* 4:225-240.
- Zavella, Patricia, 1996. "Feminist Insider Dilemmas: Constructing Ethnic Identity with Chicana Informants," Pp. 138-159 in *Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork*, edited by Diane L. Wolf. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

APPENDIX A

Consent Form I

Exploring the menstrual practices among women of Nepalese origin in the United States.

Principal Investigator: **Nitika Sharma**

PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

08/10/2011

Please read the following material that explains this research study. Signing this form will indicate that you have been informed about the study and that you want to participate. We want you to understand what you are being asked to do and what risks and benefits—if any—are associated with the study. This should help you decide whether or not you want to participate in the study.

You are being asked to take part in a research project conducted by Nitika Sharma, a graduate student in the University of Colorado at Boulder's Department of Sociology, Ketchum 409, UCB 327, Boulder, CO 80309-0327. This project is being done under the direction of Professor Joanne Belknap, of the University of Colorado at Boulder's Department of Sociology. Nitika Sharma can be reached at 928- 310-1293 or via e-mail at nsharma@colorado.edu. Professor Belknap can be reached at 303-735-2182 or via email at Joanne.Belknap@colorado.edu.

Project Description: This study intends to explore the rituals and practices adopted by Nepalese women living in the U.S. during menstruation and the individual reasons the women report for having taken up, continued, or given up the Nepalese practices and rituals around menstruation.

Procedures: I would like to talk to you and take notes on or tape record our conversation about your experiences with menstrual rites and practices. The interview might take anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour or longer, depending on how much you have to say. I will be happy to come to your house or anywhere else that you like to talk with you, or to meet where it is convenient for you, or carry the interview over the phone (you can call me to set up an interview time, and then we can decide whether it is convenient for you to give me a call or receive my call for the interview) if I cannot meet with you in person. There might be an opportunity for a follow-up interview if I discover themes in the study that we have not gone over in the first interview. This, again, is voluntary and could be carried out at a time and place of convenience.

Risks and Discomforts: Every experience carries with it some risks and benefits. A possible risk could be that you might have slight embarrassment in talking about menstruation rituals. A possible benefit is that you may enjoy reflecting on sociological aspects of the practices and how these practices differ from place to place. If there are any topics you would prefer not to talk about, just say so and we can go on to another topic. Everything that you say will be held in the strictest confidence.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits for participating. But participants will help the investigator better understand the reasons behind the rites and practices around menstruation.

Subject Payment: You will not be paid for participating in this study.

Ending Your Participation: You have the right to withdraw your consent or stop participating at any time. You have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) or refuse to participate in any procedure for any reason.

Confidentiality: Every effort will be made to maintain the privacy of your data. Your privacy will be protected in relating your interview answers in all published and written data resulting from this study. Pseudonyms (fake names) will be used to disguise your identity. All recorded and transcribed information will be kept in my personal possession and/or locked in a secure location (Nitika Sharma's office). And all recorded information will be destroyed when this research is finished.

Other than the researchers, only regulatory agencies such as the Office of Human Research Protections and the University of Colorado's Institutional Review Board may see your individual data as part of routine audits.

Questions? If you have any questions regarding your participation in this research, you should ask the investigator before signing this form. If you have questions or concerns during or after your participation, please contact Nitika Sharma at nsharma@colorado.edu or 928-310-1293.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a participant, any concerns regarding this project or any dissatisfaction with any aspect of this study, you may report them -- confidentially, if you wish -- to the Institutional Review Board, 3100 Marine Street, ARC Room A15, 563 UCB, (303) 735-3702.

Authorization: I have read this paper about the study or it was read to me. I know the possible risks (if any) and benefits. I know that being in this study is voluntary. I choose to be in this study. I know that I can withdraw at any time. I have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing 2 pages.

Name of Participant (printed) _____

Signature of Participant _____ Date _____.

(Also initial all previous pages of the consent form.)

I am consenting to be audio recorded during the participation of this research.

_____ Yes, I agree to be audio recorded during my participation in this research.

_____ No, I would not like to be audio recorded during my participation in this research.

APPENDIX B

Consent Form II

Exploring menstrual rites and practices among Nepalese women in Bhutan, India, Nepal, and the United Kingdom(the U.K.)

Principal Investigator: **Nitika Sharma**

PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM 03/31/2010

Please read the following material that explains this research study. Signing this form will indicate that you have been informed about the study and that you want to participate. We want you to understand what you are being asked to do and what risks and benefits—if any—are associated with the study. This should help you decide whether or not you want to participate in the study.

You are being asked to take part in a research project conducted by Nitika Sharma, a graduate student in the University of Colorado at Boulder's Department of Sociology, Ketchum 409, UCB 327, Boulder, CO 80309-0327. This project is being done under the direction of Professor Joanne Belknap, of the University of Colorado at Boulder's Department of Sociology. Nitika Sharma can be reached at 928-310-1293 or via e-mail at nsharma@colorado.edu. Professor Belknap can be reached at 303-735-2182 or via email at Joanne.Belknap@colorado.edu.

Project Description: This study intends to explore the rituals and practices adopted by Nepalese women living in Bhutan, India, Nepal, and the U.K. during menstruation and the individual reasons the women report for having taken up, continued, or given up the Nepalese practices and rituals around menstruation.

Procedures: I would like to talk to you and take notes on or tape record our conversation about your experiences with menstrual rites and practices. The interview might take anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour or longer, depending on how much you have to say. I will be happy to come to your house or anywhere else that you like to talk with you, or to meet where it is convenient for you, or carry the interview over the phone (you can call me to set up an interview time, and then we can decide whether it is convenient for you to give me a call or receive my call for the interview) if I cannot meet with you in person. There might be an opportunity for a follow-up interview if I discover themes in the study that we have not gone over in the first interview. This, again, is voluntary and could be carried out at a time and place of convenience.

Risks and Discomforts: Every experience carries with it some risks and benefits. A possible risk could be that you might have slight embarrassment in talking about menstruation rituals. A possible benefit is that you may enjoy reflecting on sociological aspects of the practices and how these practices differ from place to place. If there are any topics you would prefer not to talk about, just say so and we can go on to another topic. Everything that you say will be held in the strictest confidence.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits for participating. But participants will help the investigator better understand the reasons behind the rites and practices around menstruation.

Subject Payment: You will not be paid for participating in this study.

Ending Your Participation: You have the right to withdraw your consent or stop participating at any time. You have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) or refuse to participate in any procedure for any reason.

Confidentiality: Every effort will be made to maintain the privacy of your data. Your privacy will be protected in relating your interview answers in all published and written data resulting from this study. Pseudonyms (fake names) will be used to disguise your identity when using direct quotes from your interview. All recorded and transcribed information will be kept in my personal possession and/or locked in a secure location (Nitika Sharma's

office). All recorded information will be erased after transcription. All transcribed information will be destroyed when I have finished publishing out of the data (approximately 3-5 years).

Other than the researchers, only regulatory agencies such as the Office of Human Research Protections and the University of Colorado Human Research Committee may see your individual data as part of routine audits.

Questions? If you have any questions regarding your participation in this research, you should ask the investigator before signing this form. If you have questions or concerns during or after your participation, please contact Nitika Sharma at nsharma@colorado.edu or 928-310-1293.

If you have questions about the study after Nitika Sharma, the primary Investigator, has left for the United States, you can contact the following persons via e-mail or phone based on your where you live.

1. **Bipin Chandra Sharma, Kalimpong, West Bengal, India**
2. **Shreesti Shrestha, Kathmandu, Nepal**
3. **Dr. Puja Sharma, Hayes, Middlesex**
4. **Gayatri Parajuli, Phuntsholing, Bhutan**

If you have questions regarding your rights as a participant, any concerns regarding this project or any dissatisfaction with any aspect of this study, you may report them -- confidentially, if you wish -- to the Institutional Review Board, 3100 Marine Street, Rm A15, 563 UCB, (303) 735-3702.

Authorization: I have read this paper about the study or it was read to me. I know the possible risks (if any) and benefits. I know that being in this study is voluntary. I choose to be in this study. I know that I can withdraw at any time. I have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing 2 pages.

Name of Participant (printed) _____

Signature of Participant _____ Date _____.

(Also initial all previous pages of the consent form.)

I am consenting to be audio recorded during the participation of this research.

_____ Yes, I agree to be audio recorded during my participation in this research.

_____ No, I would not like to be audio recorded during my participation in this research.

APPENDIX C

Interview Guide

Although I am not going to begin with a specified interview schedule because of the inductive nature of the study, I have listed specific topics in terms of the interview structure below:

Interview Questions for women:

1. Where were you born?
2. Can you tell me your name, age, caste, family composition, occupation, level of education?
3. If married/previously married/widowed, how long have you been/were married and what is/was your husband's age, nationality?
4. If you have children, what ages and genders are they?
5. Who is the primary decision maker in your family?
6. During menstruation, do you observe certain practices?
7. If yes, what are they?
8. When did you first learn about these practices?
9. What were your first impressions when you learned about these practices?
10. What did you think of the practices before your first period?
11. Were there specific rituals that took place during your first period?
12. During adolescence, what did you think of the practice?

ASK THE NEXT SIX QUESTIONS IF SHE SAID SHE WAS EVER MARRIED.

13. Did you go through similar practices before your wedding(s)?
14. If not, how are they different?
15. Who was the greatest enforcer of the practice in your family before you were married?
16. What does/did your husband think of the practice?
17. What do you parents-in-law think of it?
18. Who is the greatest enforcer of the practice in your family after being married?
19. How do you feel about these practices?likes/dislikes.

ASK THE NEXT 3 QUESTIONS ONLY IF SHE SAID SHE HAS A DAUGHTER OR DAUGHTERS.

20. Do you think she/they will continue with the practices when she/they has/have her period or does she/they practice the same rituals as you do?
21. Are you expecting her/them to continue the practices?
22. Do you think that will change in the future?

ASK THE NEXT QUESTION IF SHE HAS MORE THAN ONE DAUGHTER.

23. Did they observe the practices differently? If yes, how?
24. Have your practices surrounding menstruation changed since you have moved from Nepal (If applicable)? If so, how?

ASK THE NEXT QUESTION IF SHE REPORTS CHANGES.

25. Why do you think the changes occurred? Do you see changes coming in the future with regards to these practices?
26. Are you in favor of these changes?
27. Is there anything else you would like to add?

In the midst of the conversation, I plan to bring up questions about other Nepalese women (urging them to use pseudonyms to make the identity of these women unidentifiable) and how their practices are similar to or different from hers.

Interview Questions for men

1. Where were you born?
2. Can you tell me your name, age, caste, family composition, occupation, level of education?
3. If married/previously married/widowed, how long have you been/were married and what is/was your wife's age, nationality?
4. If you have children, what ages and genders are they?

5. Who is the primary decision maker in your family?
6. When did you first find about menstruation?
7. How did you find out about the taboos related to menstruation?
8. Do you have sister/s?

ASK THE NEXT QUESTIONS IF HE HAS A SISTER/SISTERS.

9. (If yes to question 8) Did she observe menstrual rituals?
10. (If yes to 9) What did those practices include?
11. (If yes to 9) How did you feel about those practices?

ASK THE NEXT SET OF QUESTIONS IF HE IS MARRIED

12. Does your wife observe menstrual rituals?
13. (If yes to 12) What do those rituals involve?
14. (If yes to 12) Who is the primary enforcer of the rituals?
15. (If yes to 12) How do you feel about those rituals?

ASK THE NEXT SET IF HE HAS A DAUGHTER/DAUGHTERS/DAUGHTERS-IN-LAW

16. Does your daughter/s practice/s these rituals?
17. What would you like to say about your daughter/s adopting these practices?
18. Do you think these practices are on a decline?
19. How do you feel about that?
20. Would you like to add anything else?

APPENDIX D

Respondent Characteristics

Name	Country	Age	Marital Status	Typology
Srijana	Bhutan	21	Single	Modifier
Shuvi	Bhutan	25	Single	Abnegator
Champa	Bhutan	35	Married	Modifier
Ruma	Bhutan	36	Married	Adherent
Niva	Bhutan	38	Married	Modifier
Anima	Bhutan	40	Married	Modifier
Pranita	Bhutan	42	Married	Abnegator
Sarika	Bhutan	85	Widowed	Adherent
Srija	India	21	Single	Modifier
Indira	India	29	Single	Modifier
Hema	India	31	Married	Adherent
Geeta	India	35	Married	Modifier
Hira	India	37	Married	Adherent
Uma	India	44	Married	Adherent
Rashmi	India	45	Married	Adherent
Menuka	India	86	Married	Adherent
Asmita	Nepal	25	Married	Adherent
Shrita	Nepal	26	Single	Modifier
Suprava	Nepal	29	Single	Modifier
Pallavi	Nepal	33	Married	Adherent
Drishti	Nepal	34	Married	Adherent
Dhara	Nepal	34	Married	Adherent
Deepmala	Nepal	34	Married	Adherent
Purnima	Nepal	35	Married	Adherent
Bandana	Nepal	36	Married	Adherent
Suprina	Nepal	37	Married	Modifier
Sarala	Nepal	40	Married	Modifier
Smriti	Nepal	41	Married	Adherent
Maya	Nepal	48	Married	Adherent
Jobina	Nepal	48	Married	Adherent
Deepti	Nepal	48	Married	Adherent
Bina	Nepal	48	Married	Adherent
Sasha	Nepal	52	Married	Modifier

Name	Country	Age	Marital Status	Typology
Ashita	UK	25	Single	Adherent
Aarti	UK	28	Single	Abnegator
Nirja	UK	29	Married	Modifier
Punita	UK	31	Married	Abnegator
Rashi	UK	42	Married	Adherent
Manisha	UK	45	Married	Modifier
Rekha	UK	47	Married	Modifier
Rita	US	24	Married	Modifier
Gauri	US	26	Single	Abnegator
Anjali	US	27	Single	Modifier
Nirmaya	US	28	Married	Modifier
Aakriti	US	28	Married	Modifier
Nita	US	29	Single	Modifier
Sabhu	US	30	Single	Abnegator
Sarita	US	31	Married	Modifier
Junu	US	33	Married	Modifier
Priya	US	33	Married	Modifier
Ambika	US	34	Married	Abnegator
Kalpna	US	34	Married	Modifier
Kavita	US	35	Married	Modifier
Sushmita	US	35	Married	Modifier
Alka	US	35	Married	Modifier
Romila	US	36	Married	Modifier
Trishna	US	38	Married	Modifier
Sandhya	US	40	Married	Abnegator
Manavi	US	41	Married	Modifier
Sangeeta	US	43	Married	Modifier
Chandri	US	53	Married	Adherent
Manju	US	57	Married	Modifier