

AIF

AMERICAN
INDIA
FOUNDATION

2019-20 AIF CLINTON FELLOWS PRESENT

PERIODS, PERIOD.

stories of perseverance, education, & resilience



2019-20 AIF CLINTON FELLOWS PRESENT

**PERIODS,
PERIOD.**

stories of perseverance, education, & resilience

AMERICAN INDIA FOUNDATION

10th Floor, DLF City Court, MG Road, Near Sikanderpur Metro Station, Gurgaon 122002
216 E. 45th Street, 7th Floor New York, NY 10017
530 Lytton Avenue, 2nd Floor, Palo Alto CA 94301

First published in 2020.

This publication is not for sale.

It may not be circulated in any other binding or cover. All rights reserved.

Permission is required to reproduce any part of this publication. Permission will be freely granted to any education or nonprofit organizations.

About the American India Foundation

The American India Foundation is committed to improving the lives of India's underprivileged, with a special focus on women, children, and youth. AIF does this through high impact interventions in education, health, and livelihoods, because poverty is multidimensional. AIF's unique value proposition is its broad engagement between communities, civil society, and expertise, thereby building a lasting bridge between the United States and India. With offices in New York and California, twelve chapters across the U.S., and India operations headquartered in Delhi NCR, AIF has impacted 6.7 million lives across 26 states of India. Learn more at www.AIF.org

About the AIF Clinton Fellowship Program

The AIF William J. Clinton Fellowship for Service in India builds the next generation of service leadership committed to lasting change for underprivileged communities across India, while strengthening the civil sector landscape to be more efficient and effective. Since inception, AIF has placed close to 500 Fellows in service at 215 host organizations across 25 states of India.

Publishing Support

Rowena Kay Mascarenhas, Director, Communications and Advocacy
Chandni Wadhvani, Senior Manager, William J. Clinton Fellowship for Service in India
Katja Kurz, Program Manager, William J. Clinton Fellowship for Service in India
Amanpreet Kaur, Program Officer, William J. Clinton Fellowship for Service in India
Esther Ekoh, Program Associate, William J. Clinton Fellowship for Service in India

Cover illustrations: Srisruthi Ramesh

Produced by FACET Design, New Delhi

CONTENTS

8 INTRODUCTION
by srisruthi ramesh

9 FROM A VICIOUS TO VIRTUOUS CYCLE
by jane hammaker

17 IN PURSUIT OF BLOOD
by pallavi deshpane

27 EARNING BREAD OR GETTING INFECTED
by sahana afreen

31 BAD BLOOD
by srisruthi ramesh

41 CONCLUSION
by janice d'souza

43 CONTRIBUTORS & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



FOREWORD

We are delighted to present you with “Periods, Period.: Stories of Perseverance, Education and Resilience,” an impassioned piece authored by AIF Clinton Fellows from the class of 2019-20. The work includes a collection of stories from young women, including our fellows and program participants all across India who share their experiences as they relate to menstruation, cultural norms, and personal growth.

Building on the important and influential work in livelihoods and education that four of the 2019-20 AIF Clinton Fellows engaged in, this collection helps strengthen the voices of women across India as the topics of menstruation, women’s health, and the reproductive system shift from taboo to talked-about/ understood/ discussed. Compiled by Srisruthi Ramesh, Jane Hammaker, Pallavi Deshpande, and Sahana Afreeen, the stories shared in “Periods, Period.” shed light on the differences that appear in the context of cross-cultural engagement, and emphasize the importance of starting difficult conversations. Weaved into these stories are the illustrations created by both Srisruthi Ramesh as well as some students at YUWA School for Girls in Hutup, Jharkhand, India, whose stories are detailed in the work forming a publication that is visually pleasing as well as reflective of the spirit of the AIF Clinton Fellowship: building bridges of understanding between India and the United States.

It is a powerful testament of our shared humanity, and an exciting opportunity to share inspirational stories from the ground. We hope it encourages you to reflect on the issues listed in the publication and view them through the unique lens of cultural and regional diversity.

In Service and Gratitude,



Nishant Pandey
Chief Executive Officer
New York



Mathew Joseph
Country Director
New Delhi

American India Foundation
July 2020

INTRODUCTION

by srisruthi ramesh

36%

**of all women in india use
sanitary napkins**

SWACHH INDIA, NDTV.COM, 2019

48%

**of young girls know
what menstruation is**

DASRA FOUNDATION, 2019

**23
million**

**girls drop out school annually
due to poor of menstrual hygiene**

SWACHH INDIA, NDTV.COM, 2019

When period practices from India make headlines, it is usually for the most harrowing story: the women made to bleed in shoddy outdoor huts, later found dead from a snake bite. The above facts and figures capture the macro picture of menstrual hygiene and its impact on education in India. But even combined, these do not come close to the broad and diverse lived experience of people who menstruate in India. Aside from myself, most of the contributing authors did not work directly in menstrual hygiene; they were science teachers, disabilities advocates, and supporting the growth of small fisherwomen businesses. And yet, conversations about periods bled into all of our personal and professional lives. This anthology is inspired by the stories we've heard and witnessed, and we hope it gives you a wider glimpse into the precarious state of menstruation in India. It's time to bring the lives of everyday women in India out of the silent darkness.



FROM A VICIOUS TO VIRTUOUS CYCLE

PERIOD TALES FROM
ORMANJHI, JHARKHAND

written & illustrated by hema kumari,
chanda sahu, sunita melinga, riya kumari,
kajal kumari, sushanti kumari
& niharika baxla

edited by jane hammaker

PERIOD TALES FROM ORMANJHI

In Ormanjhi, Jharkhand, a girl's first period often comes as a surprise. Many girls are shocked and confused. Others confide in their female family members, only to be told that they should avoid touching food and household objects.

Despite the stigma, the next generation of young leaders is stepping up to promote awareness of menstruation, women's health, and the reproductive system in their communities.



Illustration by Riya Kumari, Age 14

PERIODS!

by Hema Kumari, age 14

Most unknown word in rural areas is period. Most taboo word in India is period. The women don't like to talk about this topic. Most of the girls acknowledge their period when it comes to them. The girls also don't talk about this with their friends. Most girls get periods for the first time with surprise.

I did not hear this word in my school. I got to know about periods when I was in a football institution. My friends and I were shying a lot to talk about periods. Our teacher made us understand that knowing about periods is very important so that we can stay hygienic. When I got my first period, I was a little nervous but I told my mother about it. She told me not to touch the stack of rice and pickle because it will get devastated. I tried to make my mother understand but when I was young she didn't pay attention to my word. Over time, my friends and I started to talk about menstruation and started to feel comfortable and confident.

Later on, I got the chance to be a football coach, which I am also now. When I talked to my players about the period, they all started to feel shy and uncomfortable. After some time I again introduced this topic and also told them the importance of knowing about menstruation. The first day none of the players asked me any questions, but after that, whenever they were having any questions related to periods, they did. They asked me questions which influenced them among their teammates.

The period is very important because it plays a very important role in our life. When we started to get periods a lot of changes we experienced. Our bodies started to develop. The period gives the signal to the girls that they can be mothers in the future. The connection between period and sex is that if we are having period and we will do sex. After that our period gets stopped for some months and we get pregnant. Our bodies start to develop a new life in our reproductive parts of our body.

We all need to work together to make people comfortable and talk about periods without any hesitation. We need to tell the girls that they will not fall into any superstition. We need to make them understand that this period is not a problem, it is our pride.

‘this period is not a problem, it is our pride.’



Hema Kumari is a 10th Grade student at Yuwa School for Girls in Hutup, Jharkhand, India. She is one of Yuwa's youngest football coaches and life skills workshop facilitators. After graduating from Yuwa, Hema hopes to continue her education at University and study science, math, and sociology.

MY PERIOD

by Sunita Melinga, age 20

Once upon a time there was a beautiful place where a group of people stayed together with their own morals and values. This place was amazing because children and women were given the opportunity to choose good things. In this place women were responsible for everything. Women were going out for work. They were taking care of family members. Women were the income holder of their own home. The astonishing thing about this place was that men were staying at home and playing cards only. Men were capricious and maggoty. But special about this place is that they did not want to adopt new and modern values. They were practicing their custom, tradition and culture. So here I am going to talk about a period or cramps that every woman gets in their puberty. Period is not common to talk in this type of place. It is a kind of taboo and sin for the people. Many of the women in my village do not use sanitary pads. They use only clothes. They use cloth and wash their period clothes and hang it inside the home so that nobody can see that. Many of the parents failed to tell their daughters about periods. Many girls do not know about this because of a lack of discussion about menstruations.

When I was young I did not know about it. I used to see my sisters using clothes with red marks on them. I always had many questions but did not dare to ask because of shame and shyness. But gradually I understood from my sisters, cousin sisters and teachers. I was also having a menstruation discussion with my mentors and still continue. But when I first got my period, I was totally confused about what to do. I even did not tell any of my family members. I was feeling ashamed and disgusted. After a long time, they got to know about it when they noticed my way of walking.

During periods, girls are not allowed to climb on the tree, not allowed to worship, not allowed to go inside temples and neither are girls allowed to touch pickles. If girls will touch the pickles then it will rot the pickles. There are many things that girls are not allowed to do. People have believed before that they cannot burn their pads, if they will burn the pads then they will not have children in future. They will be sterile and they cannot reproduce children any more. When I lead workshops about menstruations to young children and talk about it, nobody dares to ask any questions or speak about it. When I ask them about periods, they rarely tell me the answers. When I ask them what they call period in their local language, they even do not say anything. I used to give examples to motivate them to speak by giving my own story.

Amazing thing is that they did not even want to listen about menstruations from me. They started laughing, looking down and glancing with each other. But later on they understood and now some of the girls freely talk with me and share their own situation on their period. They ask me questions about menstruations without much hesitation. They know why girls get periods very well. When I ask them why girls get periods and what it means, they answer me that girls get periods because they are healthy and ready to reproduce offspring. Now, many women and girls are aware of menstruations and they use sanitary pads instead of clothes. They also spread awareness about menstruations through meetings, dramas and videos. They also distribute sanitary pads so that women stop using clothes.



Sunita Melinga is a recent graduate of Yuwa School. She is a Yuwa coach and workshop facilitator. She hopes to study business in university, so that she can bring change to her rural village through entrepreneurship.

‘I was feeling ashamed and disgusted.’

FICTITIOUS BELIEFS FOR PERIODS

by Chanda Sahu, age 16

The unwilling day has come. My first period day. I had been working to not face the same problems as an unknowing girl faces on her very first period. The character from the book “The Famous Five”, written by Enid Blyton, George, never wanted to be left behind in any situation even if it’s a dangerous one. Same as her I never want to stand back in any plights. I had always been willing to know the topic of my elder sister friends’ conversations because whenever they were talking about periods, they used to talk in soft and low voice. But since I was pretty much young according to them, they always forced to exclude me from the group. Do you think I will sit silently after being excluded from there? No, never. I used to hum around them and silently sit nearby them so that I could hear them. They were so much into the topic that they stayed carefree of me sitting next to them.

The conversation was full of abounded things such as when a girl is on her period she can’t shampoo her hair, can’t plant, can’t visit temple, can’t eat sour things, can’t touch pickles and so on. Each of these have some kind of tradition. If you will shampoo your hair on period days then excessive bleeding will happen. If you will visit the temple then the God will be angry. If you will plant, it won’t grow. If you will touch pickles, then it will have the white fungi and it will be wasted. All these fictitious beliefs.

Now, how can a village girl think positively if she has to experience these made-up things. This is the reason why a girl hesitates to speak openly about her period. For most of the girls, their mom is the first person whom they tell about their sadness and happiness openly, thinking that she would advise positively. But when the topic is period, the belief doesn’t come true because her mom has been practicing all the society’s made-up beliefs. They suggest, what they have been practicing in their life.

Now, I am 16 years old and I have been attending my teams workshops related to periods. I am much more confident talking openly and teaching about periods. On one of the Wednesdays, I gave a workshop in my girls team. One of my participants asked me, what is the topic for today? I said menstruation, period. Most of the participants put their hands on their mouths. They were shocked because they never hear these words in surroundings. I pretty much knew their

reaction because I have been living in same kind of society, where no one was there to step forward to tell me about this wonderful gift, even though it is every woman’s experience.

Now my NGO, Yuwa, is helping to change this and bring the reality of period by giving one day of workshop each week. Numbers of coaches are educated on this topic in Yuwa and they facilitate the workshops in different villages. This is helping the girls to know, what is it? Why does this come and how to deal with it? “Now the vicious cycle is changing into a virtuous cycle”.

“Now the vicious cycle is changing into a virtuous cycle.”



Chanda Sahu is a 12th Grade student at Yuwa School, a football coach, and a life skills Workshop facilitator. She will study abroad in the United States for the 2020-21 school year through the U.S. Department of State YES Exchange program. She loves science, especially biology.

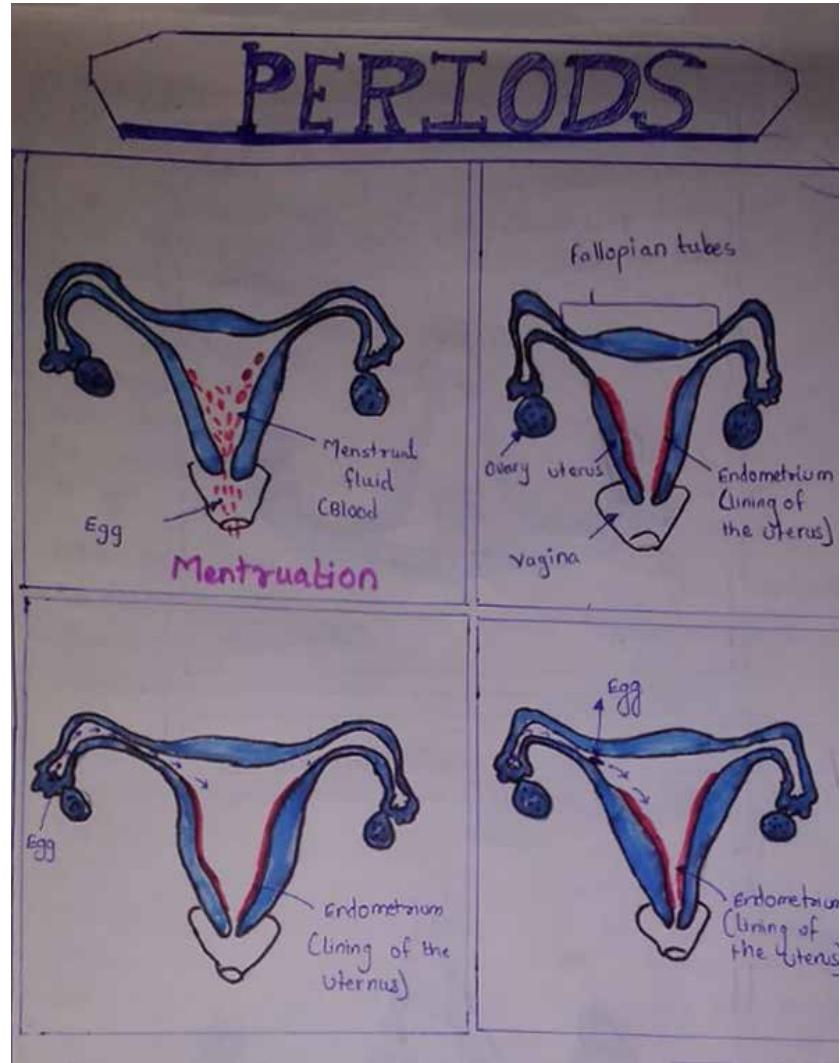
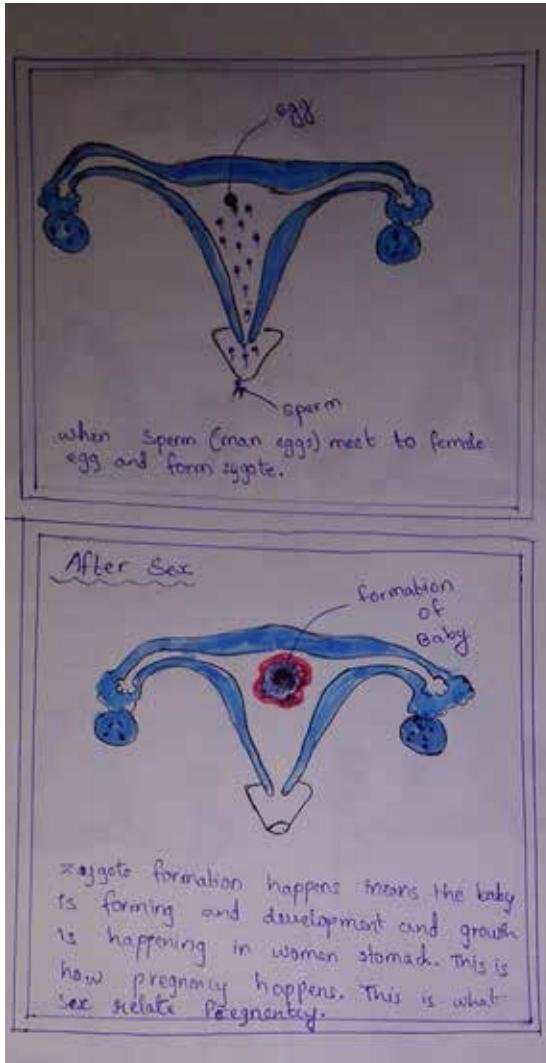


Illustration by Kajal Kumari, age 14



Illustration by Chanda Sahu, age 17



Illustration by Chanda Sahu, age 17



Illustration by Hema Kumari



Illustration by Sushanti Kumari, age 18

Power of a girl Who gives birth to many lives. Menstruation is not just a life cycle of a girl from 12 to old. It's a life living as many others. A girl should not be ashamed of herself of having this menstruation cycle. A period should not be a burden but it should be seen as giving lives. Period is cool.

NEHA'S STORY

by Niharika Baxla, Child Development Officer, at Yuwa

When I first started my period, I didn't have any idea what it was.

I thought it was a one-time thing, and that I will be fine. I wanted to tell this to my Mom, but I was hesitant. I was scared of being judged. I didn't even share this with my friends. I didn't know what to do with the blood.

I was 11 years old at that time.

I started using newspaper to soak up the blood. After a few months my aunt noticed a stain in my skirt. She asked me if I had gotten my period and I refused to tell her anything. My mom didn't take her comment seriously.

I continued to use newspaper or papers from my school books for a year. My inner thigh used to get not only rashes, but wounds around them from the paper. Finally, one of my friends who had already started her period noticed my stains. She asked me if I bleed.

I started crying - not because of my period, but because of the rashes, wounds, and the shame I felt. I used to pray to God - please don't make me bleed next time.

After I told my friend what I go through, the very next day she gifted me a packet of pads. My life got easier but I didn't know why this happens every month. We used to discuss among my friends that is might be because we have done something wrong. We discussed this a lot. About the rashes, the smells, the pain, the discomfort. One time, one of my friend's suggested to use mustard seed on her rashes. I did it, and I can still feel the burn and the pain.

My journey of period started very rough. It was disastrous, actually. I wish someone have taught me what was happening to me.

But I am happy today. Today, because of such wonderful initiatives like the Yuwa Workshop program, girls around us have access to information. Society is more open about periods. I am getting the opportunity to spread awareness and train girls and their communities about menstruation.

***‘I used
to pray
to God
- please
don't
make me
bleed
next time.’***

IN PURSUIT OF BLOOD

by pallavi deshpande



IN PURSUIT OF BLOOD

Low moans periodically broke the silence of the night. Resigned, Sravanthi lay on her sagging and torn straw mattress, barely covered by her paper-thin blanket. "I'll have to mend the mattress tomorrow. I don't think my back can take any more of this", she thought to herself as she forced herself to sleep.

She was in the Period House. That was the name she gave the 7 feet by 7 feet windowless room to which she was cast away during her monthly courses. Although a shanty, or a hut, or a filthy communal prison for women was a more befitting description of the structure. "I'm just happy I have a little extra room to move about for a couple of nights", she always thought to herself. She never could sit still for long periods of time. Or, sleep in the same position for more than a few minutes. "Look at all this space and freedom I have for these four days", she thought to herself as she went about making plans for how she would keep herself busy. Maybe she would finally write poetry again, like she did in youth before getting married to Rangayyah. It was these small liberties with imagination that kept her just at the precipice, at the tipping point of sanity and desolation. And something much darker, the sparks of rage she felt every so often at what had become of her life.

Usually, she was able to spend winter nights lost in childhood memories and singing cherished bawdy local songs to herself. However, tonight, Sravanthi could barely manage to get any sleep. It was unusually cold for this time of the year, the mattress had a gaping hole to its left, and the sheet of paper covering only irritated her skin, forget cocooning her in warmth. The winter also did a number on her muscles. Tired from squatting all day long, cleaning various houses, she could hear the creaks and clunks of her bones, their wordless protests, which would soon translate into deep aches across her body. She couldn't help the moans, chatters, and cries escaping

her as she forced herself into composure. No, she didn't want anyone to hear the weaknesses, cracks, and pain within her that she guarded so fiercely. She bit down on her lip strong enough to draw blood. Funny, she thought. This blood is okay, that blood is not okay. What makes this blood this blood and that blood that blood? She tasted something metallic and wondered if all blood tastes the same. With the metallic tinge followed a taste of salt that was all too familiar. Those tears that always betrayed her, forcing their way from her body with a will of their own. These fluids will be the death of me, she muttered to herself, half laughing, half crying.

Cursing her fate, she sat up to massage her legs, hoping to relieve some of the stiffness. Moaning again, this time with relief, she poured the last of her energies into kneading and caressing her throbbing muscles. She didn't notice as a shadow stared at her from the crack in the opened door. A forlorn look marked the face, or what was left of it, of the lady standing at the door. Amma stared at Sravanthi. Her heir, a material reminder of her own existence, and the child she'd so lovingly raised, only to watch her be cast back into the unchanged wretched existence. No one knew where Amma came from or what her name was. No one knew how old Amma was, only that she had outlived the drought, floods, plague, disease, and death of her family. She just was just there, the grandma of the village, respected and ridiculed in the same breath.

Hurling a slew of curse words at whoever was listening, Amma slunk back to her own hut, right across the Period House. Amma knew she only had a year or so left. It was the way her muscles moved, her mind responded, the longer healing periods, and something more instinctual that led her to this conclusion. She didn't mind. She lived a long life, a bit too long, filled with too many memories. She clawed her thoughts away from the moans and cries

of Sravanthi and vowed to encash all her reputation on one bet.

Sravanthi lay wide awake as the roosters sounded their alarm to the village on the fifth day of her courses. She'd barely slept these past few days. She was looking forward to her *maila snanam* (purification bath) that would finally lead her back to her own kitchen and into the embrace of her husband. Sravanthi and Rangayyah had been married for five years now and were desperately hoping for a baby this year. He wasn't a terrible man, Sravanthi mused. He worked, came home straight from the fields, didn't hit her, and performed his nightly duties to her satisfaction. It was when she was walking back from her bath that Ranga, her neighbor's 12-year old, came running to her with news. Huffing and panting, he told her that Amma had gathered a village meeting and requested that everyone join. Apparently, Amma had decided that the village passed some test and was now worthy of secrets she had been waiting to reveal since her arrival, secrets that would lead to prosperity and fame.

"Nonsense", Sravanthi retorted. "Amma raised me. If she did have the secret to wealth, why wouldn't she have told me this before?" Ranga merely shrugged and began dragging her towards this gathering. "Amma asked me to bring everyone and I'm just doing that", he answered begrudgingly. Sravanthi knew the location of the meeting without even having to ask Ranga. It would be under that banyan tree by the *zamindar's* (land owner's) house under whose shade all meetings of any legitimacy or importance were conducted. Sighing, Sravanthi allowed herself to be dragged along. After all, she wanted to find out what this new drama was all about.

Under the banyan tree, the only living entity in the village older than Amma in the village, sat Amma, surrounded by everyone, a picture that Sravanthi thought looked like a catalogue of all the possible varieties of human beings one could meet in their life.

In her grainy yet clear voice, Amma was saying, "...all this

while, I was testing you. After all, God knows I could not divulge a secret like this without proof of your qualification to bear it. You've all passed. When I came to this village as a young girl, I was given a recipe by a powerful saint. A recipe that can pave the route to prosperity and fame". The ladies started muttering to each other, using their sarees as a cover against the dry wind while the men all held a pleading look in their eyes as they urged Amma to speak faster.

"... this recipe imbues men with virility and strength unlike any other. One dose of this and you'll be producing babies and tilling land like you're not just your own being, but possess the collective seed and strength of ten men".

Excited gasps, nervous glances, and increasing curiosity were all etched onto the villagers. One man, desperate in search of a wife and job, fell at Amma's feet, begging her to liberate him with this knowledge. In the eyes of the men in the group, you could already see their imagined palaces, wealth, and hopes of a future filled with luxury. In the eyes of the women, you could see aspirations for new houses, maybe some house help, and a few sons to pamper them in their old ages.

"...but the path to this power is not so easy. There is a reason why you don't hear villages screaming of their indestructibility. This recipe will test physically and emotionally", Amma proceeded. "For six months, men will have to mix water, sugar, and blood in a bowl and apply it all over your lower body. The healthier the woman, the better the blood".

If the crowd was partly filled with nervous energy a couple minutes ago, now they were positively drowning in it. Murmurs, gasps, and questions were being hurled one after the other. Whose blood would it have to be? Where would they get blood from?

Cutting through the noise, Amma started again, a little louder than before, "... the blood has to come from a woman. Not any blood. That blood that women expel during their monthly courses. That blood that you have

been trained to view as impure. Why do you think this belief has been so deeply imbedded in you? Don't you see? They didn't want men to misuse this power, so they purposely led you astray into the world of ignorance. Having lived among you for decades was my test for all of you. To see if you were ready for this power. It was mine to give. Whether or not you heed my advice will determine your own fates". With that Amma got up and walked away as if she hadn't just upturned the daily life and balance of the entire village.

The aftermath of this meeting looked like the aftermath of a battle announcement. Every single soul present started frantically debating the legitimacy and feasibility of this idea. Some even phased their discussions into a logistical meeting about how, when, and where they could collect the blood. Sravanthi scanned the crowd and felt an uneasy knot form in her stomach as her eyes rested on Rangayyah, his eyes gleaming with hope and excitement.

As she made her way back to her house, Sravanthi couldn't help wonder where this new quest for a bowl of blood would lead them. Something told her that this secret power, as Amma termed it, would affect her fate in more ways than one. "It's funny", she mused to herself, "...society dictated how I understood my own flow, society dictated how I responded to my own flow, and now society will continue to dictate what will happen to my flow. Is this blood mine in name only? First, the cloth swallowed it, then the earth swallowed it, and now my husband's body will", she half giggled to herself.

It was two days later that a huge crash woke Sravanthi. Checking her bearings, she ran outside to pinpoint the source of this boom when she saw Rangayyah and a group of men she recognized from the neighborhood breaking down the Period House. Her Period House. The Female Communal Prison.

"There is no need for this now", exclaimed the man with the potbelly peeking out of his baniyan. "All you ladies should stay in the house from now on. You know. To

prevent any blood from spilling onto the floor. It'll also be easy to collect it throughout the four or five days also. Akka (sister), now you can sleep next to your husband like a queen".

Sravanthi wondered if this was her cue to cry out of happiness and graciousness. Yes, it was high time this House got a renovation, maybe some doors, a plumbing system, and maybe a bed. But, she wasn't ready to part with it at a moment's notice. It's not like she had any love for the decrepit hut. Quite the contrary. But allowing herself to feel relief also came with the baggage of acknowledging the hurt, self-pity, pain, humiliation, tears, and disgust she'd felt when she was locked up in there. She'd carefully guarded her lived experiences, lying there in the dark all alone, and embellished and manipulated it so as to mold it into half-truths that she could live with. She did not know what would happen if she let this illusion crumble now. And she wasn't ready to find out, at least not in front of these strangers. She put on her practiced half-smile, thanked them, and went back to her bed, wondering what else was going to happen in the next ten days or so when she was due for her courses.

Over the next few days, Rangayyah forbade her from going to work. She would rest at home and prepare for their first harvest. Her body had to be ripe and ready, he'd said. As she walked to Amma's hut to give her this news, Sravanthi realized that for the first time in days, maybe weeks, Rangayyah had not come to their bed last night. Had he come home? If he had, where had he slept? She reminded herself to talk to him about that tonight. If they were to make a baby this year, they had to try, and weren't these few days, just before her courses, the most fortuitous? She had to talk to him tonight.

That night, as she caressed Rangayyah's tired body, her caresses were returned by reverent touches. Not caresses, but the kind of touch you give to a glass doll. For all the miseries in her life, lack of an exciting marriage bed wasn't one of them. What was he suddenly worried about?

As her caresses grew more targeted, Rangayyah's desperation to escape grew stronger. Rangayyah knew in his mind that he would not let Sravanthi get pregnant. Rangayyah couldn't stop replaying the conversation between Saradayyah and him this evening. The rains hadn't come this year and a drought seemed imminent. Couldn't they use this new power to free themselves from the clutches of starvation and poverty this year? There were rich *zamindars* and older merchants who would pay a good sum for this blood. After all, a woman's period blood belongs to her man also. Rangayyah had waited for five years for a child, what was one more year, reasoned Saradayyah. All Rangayyah had to do was to keep Sravanthi healthy and collect her blood for the next few months.

It's just a matter of a few months, he promised himself. Once he had enough to safely tide over this drought, he would resume their conjugal attempts. After all, what would he feed his child when the rains failed? The fantasy of a government subsidy? Pushing himself onto his elbows, Rangayyah decided to indeed worship his crop before harvest. Slowly inching his fingers downwards, he answered Sravanthi's caresses with some of his own. Heady with pleasure, Sravanthi was nevertheless keenly aware of Rangayyah's insistence to not couple. Not knowing what to do, but also not wanting to lose the moment, she let herself drown the multitude of sensations, deciding to confront her husband sometime the next day. When was the last time he'd solely focused on her pleasure anyway?

A day before her courses were due, Sravanthi went to visit Amma. Yes, she wanted to check on her matriarch's health, but also to talk to her about something that was nagging her all day. She should have been elated to be able to sleep on her own bed, with her own functional blanket. However, all she felt was a guarded concern. Was it really okay for her to be in the house during her period? What if it brought ruin to her family? She wouldn't be able to take that on her conscience. She'd lived in that hut for five days every month for the past few years and she didn't mind

continuing to do so as long as she didn't anger the Gods. She was seeking the Goddess' blessing for a child and she did not want to anger her now. She'd been fasting every Thursday for this for weeks. She couldn't let that all go to waste.

Amma listened to Sravanthi speak her heart out. She hadn't been able to spend much time with her granddaughter after that meeting under the tree. She'd expected men to buzz around her like bees, hungry for more information, but the sheer force and tenacity with which they pursued her, from dawn to dusk, left her too tired to seek any more company. But now, as she watched her granddaughter's round belly and healthy skin tone, she decided she'd taken the right decision. Assuring her and reinforcing the importance of her health and rest, Amma urged Sravanthi to enjoy this change in situation.

Two days had passed since Sravanthi had visited Amma. Her courses were supposed to come yesterday. She was not usually late. Rangayyah had already asked her twice if she'd started bleeding yet. He'd readied a silver bowl and some utensils with which to collect the blood. He'd even taken the next two days off from work to make sure he didn't miss a drop of their blood. Their source of income.

"What is going on? Are you okay?" Rangayyah asked, half concerned, half accusatory. "It's just like you to stop giving me my blood when I most need you to", he exclaimed.

"I am not your blood cow", retorted Sravanthi. "It's not as if I can control this. And since when has this blood become your blood? I've been bleeding for almost a decade now and you never bothered to split this ownership with me. It's all the food you've been stuffing into me for the past few days. Who knew you were capable of all this?"

"Don't speak that way to me. If not you, I can find some other bleeding harlot to give me her blood. Just because I'm treating you well, you've decided to sit on my head. I don't know all that, just go to Amma and figure out how to start your courses again", Rangayyah said, as he sighed into his hands.

"Let's wait for a day or two. It might just be my body adjusting to the new situation", cajoled Sravanthi as she crouched next to her husband. She understood his frustration. Naively, she even thought she shared it. Maybe he was waiting for the blood to give himself the virility with which to sire a child, their child. But somewhere in the recesses of her mind, her gut warned her that there was more to it. She didn't want to acknowledge it. What if the thought itself held the power to will all her premonitions into reality. Silently chiding herself, she said a small prayer and lay her head on Rangayyah's shoulder.

A piercing scream tore through the silence that had shrouded the couple. Outside, someone was shouting, no screeching. Both Rangayyah and Sravanthi ran towards the road, from where screaming seemed to emanate. When they got close enough to the screaming, they realized that it was an argument. In a voice that seemed familiar. It was Saradayyah and his wife, Lakshmi. Lakshmi lay sprawled on the road, her belongings strewn about her. Upon inquiring from her neighbor, Sravanthi learnt that Lakshmi was a woman who hadn't had her courses for two years now even though she was only 39 years old. Sravanthi had heard about the women who stopped their courses early and couldn't get pregnant after that. She'd never known that Lakshmi is one of them. Apparently, Saradayyah hadn't known this either until a couple hours ago. How would he, mused Sravanthi. Saradayyah was the kind of man who drank himself into a stupor deep enough to forget his own name, let alone keep track of Lakshmi's courses. Other than the thread around her neck, only welts and bruises seemed to be the evidence of her marital life.

Now that Saradayyah had realized Lakshmi was of no use to him, her blood dried over the years, he cast her out of his home and life not unlike the used cotton cloth Lakshmi had cast back into the earth, a lifeless object, to be used and thrown away.

Sravanthi looked around and realized that all the older women were now living in abandoned quarters, chased

out of their houses to make way for the younger women. She'd even heard of a rumored murder that had been committed in the name of blood. Those women who weren't cast out, were forced to watch their husbands marry younger and fertile women. She heard from Ranga that men had already started charging an absurd amount for this medicine. "Who would pay that much? That's our 6-month salary, Ranga. It's too much", she'd laughed with the little boy. But now, looking around her, only surrounded by young women who reminded her of rivers waiting to overflow, she believed it.

The village doctor had been beaten and chased away when he tried to intervene between Saradayyah and Lakshmi. "These doctors are not yet qualified to know the secret, that's why they ridicule us. They'll come back to us when they're ready. Until then, if they try to stop us, they will have no place here", reasoned the mob that had formed around Saradayyah.

Enjoy and rest, Amma had told her. Is this what she meant when she'd said that? Sravanthi wondered who really owned this resource. "What times I live in!" she mused, "Menstrual blood becoming a scarce resource". But what was the point, she wondered. The blood might have been hers, but the control over it was never hers. Just like how she'd been a puppet to society before, justifying to herself their inflictions, she would continue to do so. Sravanthi wasn't fool enough to believe that any of the men suddenly viewed them as elevated, or holding the key to a secret power. At most, she was an obstacle. Or even worse, a well from which her husband would keep drawing from until it ran dry one day.

Sravanthi wanted to take Lakshmi home, nourish her, feed her, and hug her. They'd been good friends once. They had worked in the fields side by side some three or four years ago when the village saw a bountiful harvest. They had shared the humiliation, pain, and trauma that was the hallmark of the Period House. But more than anything, Sravanthi felt like her own fate was tied to Lakshmi's. She

had an irrational foreboding that her own wellbeing was intrinsically intertwined with that of Lakshmi's. No sooner had Sravanthi taken a step forward to stop the barrage of blows Saradayyah was raining down on Lakshmi than Rangayyah pulled her back.

"No. You are to stay out of this. You're expecting to start your courses soon and I don't want you to be worried about such lying harlots anyway. I feel bad for her as well, but what do you want me to do? Let's go away from here", said Rangayyah.

"What if that was me?" emboldened, Sravanthi asked. "I haven't been late in years and I still haven't gotten my courses yet. What if I've run dry, too?" Any more inquiries were silenced by the look on Rangayyah's face. No, the anger didn't faze her. She'd deliberately provoked it. What scared her to no end was the look of betrayal and disgust that had crept into his face.

"Don't say such inauspicious things", snapped Rangayyah and all but dragged her home. "Pray for that blood or God only knows what I might do". The look on Rangayyah's face told Sravanthi all she wanted to know. He too suspected it. Alone, lying in bed, Sravanthi ran her hand over her flat stomach. "It can't be. Please. Don't let it be. Not now", she prayed with all her might. She didn't trust her husband right now. He was blinded by this quest for wealth and power. After seeing what had happened to Lakshmi, Sravanthi was even more afraid. Not for herself, but for her unborn baby. With every fleeting minute, as the reality sunk into her, a bone-deep fear also lodged itself in her chest. "I will explain to him that this is a product of our love and years of effort", murmured Sravanthi, she tried to convince herself. However, for a week after their conversation, Rangayyah did not come home. She could only guess where he chose to spend his time -- at the temple praying for his blood, in the arms of someone whose blood he isn't after, or passed out in the company of Saradayyah.

Eight nights later, for the first time in their married life, Rangayyah stumbled into the house stinking of liquor and

cheap *bidis* (cigarettes). Slurring and swaying, Rangayyah clumsily made his way around the house to Sravanthi. Holding her by the arms, he looked into her eyes and asked, "This is your first month of pregnancy, right? I would have heard otherwise anyway". It was as though someone had pulled the ground right from under her feet.

"It's too soon to tell. Maybe it's just a few days late. Don't worry", Sravanthi tried to reason with him.

"Don't worry? The fields have run dry, the grains are running out, we have only enough money to tide us over a month, maybe two, and you're asking me not to worry?" asked Rangayyah. He didn't scream, nor did he cajole. He sounded heart-broken and tired. Worried, Sravanthi knelt beside him and held his hand, "Don't worry, this baby will bring a turn in our fortune. Watch the next crop be plentiful. Just you..."

"Stop", Rangayyah cut her off. "I've decided. The only way to survive this year is to get rid of this thing eating our money. We can make a child again, but, think Sravanthi. Don't you want a child when you can afford to feed it three times a day? The money I earn from six months of back-breaking hard work, I can earn in one sale of this medicine to a wealthy merchant. I need your blood. But for that, I'm going to ask you to have to make this sacrifice. If not, you're going to force me to take desperate measures. And I know you don't like sharing, me or this house, so beware...", he said.

"Is this a threat or a request?" asked Sravanthi. She could no longer feel her own breath or her body. All that existed were Rangayyah's words.

"Both", came his measured reply. "Look, I don't want to do this. But you need to understand. For me. For us. Do this", he pleaded.

"What? Kill my own baby? Make another sacrifice? What am I? Earlier my job was to try and pump out babies. When we finally succeeded, after all these years, you suddenly want me to drop everything, at your word, and

get onto my next task? Which is what? Pumping out blood? Squatting over our bed so you can collect and scrape out every drop of blood? Where were you all those nights when I had to sleep on tattered, blood-stained mattresses, barely covered by a thin blanket, all alone, scared, in pain, and humiliated for what I had to go through? Do you know how I spent those nights, controlling and straining against my own emotions? When I convinced myself that my blood was so dirty that it shouldn't see the light of day to justify my being locked up in that hell hole? When I left the door open for anyone to see because the only source of light and air was the moonlight outside? You want me to make another sacrifice? Fine. Take it. Take this baby from us. But remember this moment. Remember when I, I graced you with this sacrifice. Remember when we killed a life on your whim. Remember when you sell this blood that this is mine, not ours. My emotional and physical labor that you're calling our earnings. Remember that you're selling my labor, my work, and my body. You want to take our baby, fine. Take it!" screamed Sravanthi, as she sagged onto the floor.

"I'll bring the supplies", said Rangayyah. Was that grief in his voice? Or shame? Or victory? Sravanthi didn't doubt the authenticity of the grief, but she surely didn't doubt the unmistakable undertone of victory. She knew where he'd gone. Everyone in the village knew that chilli and ground-up paste from a local plant was what women were forced to use. Rangayyah would apply that paste around a long stick and pierce her womb. A couple of agonizing hours later, Sravanthi would be rid of the organism that was sucking up all her valuable blood. Valuable or disgusting? Which one was it? How cruel fate is that what started with a recipe, will also end with a recipe. One, holding a promise of new life, and the other, the promise of death. With a hollow laugh, she remarked, "What fate I have that I get to try both recipes in one lifetime".

As she waited for Rangayyah to return, Sravanthi desperately craved for someone who would love her, no conditions or sacrifices required. She wanted Amma.

Within a couple of minutes, Rangayyah had returned with all the ingredients and set to work diligently. Is this what my husband looks like when he works? When he's focused? Like he's got no other worry in the world except the perfection of the medicine? He even looks excited, Sravanthi noted emotionlessly. She on the other hand was reserving her will and energy for her own battle ahead. She would need every ounce of it and more. She'd heard stories of the women who screamed and screamed until they lost their voice, their mind, or their life. Which would she lose? Would she join the ranks of the lunatic women forced to sacrifice their sanity? Maybe Rangayyah would use the blood from her body and sell it as period blood. Stop, she warned herself. She couldn't think like this even before the ordeal started. She wasn't going to let herself give up. She would fight and bite down all those feelings of pain, disgust, and humiliation -- she had years of practice after all.

Laying her down on the mattress, Rangayyah couldn't help but gaze into her eyes, as though searching for something. Maybe it was forgiveness, thought Sravanthi. Or maybe it was affirmation, some signal that he was in the right for exercising his duty. No, Sravanthi thought to herself. I'm not ready to give him this.

"Once you do what needs to be done, I need you to run and grab Amma. I need her. Do you understand me? Go get her, immediately. Promise me", said Sravanthi, as she held his gaze with her own piercing deadpan stare.

"Yes", replied Rangayyah. And the deed was done.

When a tall man was violently shaking Amma awake, she thought it was her calling to go. But no, the shaking and the voice seemed all too human, too familiar even. As she tiredly opened her eyes, she saw Rangayyah hovering over her, with a look of desperation and urgency in his eyes. "It's Sravanthi. I need you to come with me right away", Rangayyah said, half dragging Amma out of bed. Startled, Amma quickly followed him to the bed where Sravanthi lay.

"What have you done?" cried Amma. Amma felt a bone-deep chill and all her blood drain out of her face when she saw her granddaughter lay sprawled on the floor, writhing, screaming, and crying, asking for mercy. She sat down and took Sravanthi's head in her lap, trying to hold her still and distract her. But no, trying to hold her still only made her scream worse.

In the corner of the room, Rangayyah sat, watching, and heaving. "Spineless bastard", murmured Amma. She wanted to do a lot more than hurl abuses at him, but Sravanthi's eyes drew her back. There was a haunted look in her eyes. Sravanthi had stopped writhing now. But it was probably because the pain had paralyzed her, Amma knew. One look into her eyes and Amma knew, the pain, the sacrifice, and the cost of the bet Amma had made.

Eight hours later, the deed was done. She'd seen too many cases. Sravanthi's mutilated and contorted body lay on the bed, the mattress soaked in blood. Rangayyah sat beside his wife, holding her hand, in shock. It wasn't even Amma's slaps that woke him up from his daze. It wasn't even Amma's screams. It was the lack of Sravanthi's voice that eventually did. Why wasn't she waking up? He nudged her once, twice, and then repeatedly as Amma pulled him away from the lifeless corpse of his wife. "Don't disturb her. Let her lay in peace in her death at least", said Amma. It was the utter despair in her voice

that made Rangayyah look up from her body and into the eyes of Amma.

"I told her that it was finally time to rest. That it was freedom from that prison that you threw her into for five days every month. You think you were fulfilling your responsibility?" spat Amma. "You used her. You treated her like an object, bending her to your and your society's will. You cast her away into that prison based on her blood impurity and you brought her back and tried to milk her like a cow based on her blood's value. When will you view women as humans as opposed to a means to your end? Blood is blood. Go tell this to everyone in the village. Go tell them that blood is neither impure nor medicinal. There is no superpower. I was just trying to give the women another life. Well, your object broke. Blood is blood, go tell everyone that!"

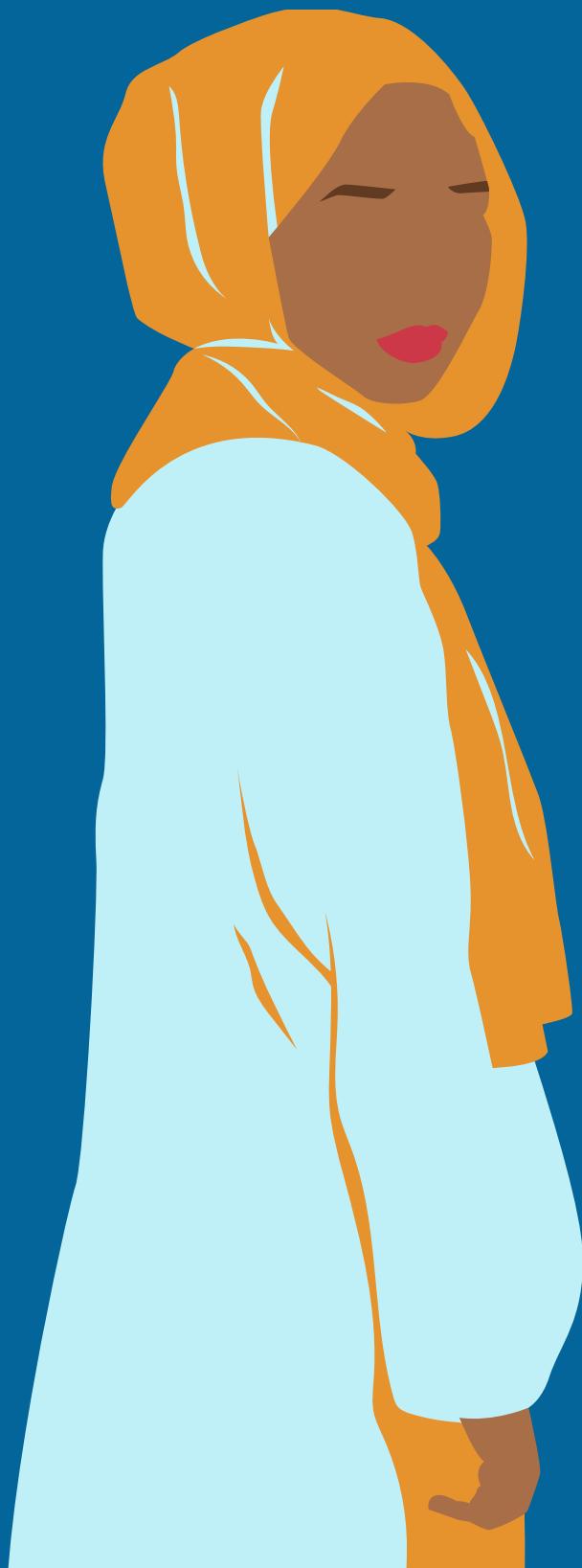
Amma let her hands trace the outline of her granddaughter's face, taking in the features, shape, and memorizing the contours of her face. "You demanded a sacrifice. Here is your offering", said Amma, levelling her gaze at Rangayya before she got to leave.

She'd overheard from Saradayyah's wife that today was going to be his first sale; Rs.1,000 for her blood. The next morning, at the break of dawn, Amma packed her few belongings and walked away from the village. And like that, the pursuit of blood was over.

EARNING BREAD OR GETTING INFECTED

THE FISHERWOMEN OF
ODISHA

by sahana afreen



EARNING BREAD OR GETTING INFECTED



Fishing community settlement beside the sea in Ganjam district. Picture Credit: Sahana Afreen

Akhila was a 12-year-old girl who lived with her father as she lost her mother during her childhood. She lived in a rural coastal village of Odisha. Her father was the one who took care of her every need, whatever he could do. He was a fisherman and they also lived within the fishing community of the area called Besthas Palli. Besthas is a caste in South India mainly in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu. The people of this caste traditionally work in hunting and fishing. Palli means settlement, so the name directly reflects the work of the community and the history of the people. Half of the people in this region are border migrants who got separated or migrated from Andhra Pradesh to Odisha.

As a child, Akhila didn't like to go to school like the other community children because their mother tongue was Telugu and the school's official language was Odia as the school was located in Odisha. So her father started forcing her to visit the school but after some time he let it go because it was usual for children to drop out of school in their community. So he was also fine with it.

When Akhila stopped going to school, she went with her father for fishing and started helping her father with the work. It became very usual and normal for both of them to go fishing and come back home and prepare their meals and rest. Their lives looked very similar. Her father was



*Women coming in a local store to sell their fish.
Picture Credit: Sahana Afreen*

not a big patriarch to ask her to cook after coming back from the same work and having spent the same amount of energy in fishing.

Their life was going fine but one night she suddenly started having very heavy pain in her stomach and she asked her father to go to work alone. Later in the day she started bleeding and her whole skirt was getting red because of blood flow and this made her feel afraid that she was going to die. So, out of fear and pain she started

crying very loud. Her cry was loud enough to inform her neighbour that something is wrong. She suddenly saw Laxmi, her neighbour coming inside her house leaving her fishing net outside which she was weaving when she heard the sound. Even before asking why she was crying she figured out that she had come to the stage of menstruation and it was her first time which is why she was crying. It was very normal for her to see Akhila cry as she had seen many other girls being in the same state during their first flow. When Akhila saw her, she started crying more and saying that she is going to die because she is having a lot of pain and the blood is all over. Then Laxmi told her that it's not something which is going to kill her, it's normal and all women go through this and after that day, Akhila also had the flow every month. To know that it's normal and happens to almost all women every month, Akhila felt relaxed and curious and started asking about it. Then Laxmi told her about others' and her experiences that how they all also got shocked and frightened when they had their first flow as it's a secret not to be revealed to others but definitely to be celebrated for the first flow.

As time passed by she got used to it and continued fishing with her father. With every month of her periods flow she didn't stop herself from going fishing as the developing market was going down and if they both would not work together for even a day, it would directly affect their next meal of the day. So she went fishing with her father everyday without missing a day. In the journey to earn their daily bread, she neglected her health and avoided the uneasiness in her flow days while boating for fish. She was unaware about the effect of being exposed to sea water during her periods, which might be affecting her body. But she was ignoring it by making different excuses and by blaming all her health problems on her periods.

After a few years, she got married to a man from her own community and this changed her life. She prepared everything for her husband to go fishing by contributing to seaweed collection, fish curing, marketing, net making and prawn seed collection... plus she did all household

chores. After a year she got pregnant and in a few months of her pregnancy, she had problems in her pregnancy and it turned out that her uterus was infected, which was becoming problematic. A few weeks after receiving this information, she lost her baby in a miscarriage due to the infected uterus. As a young woman, she felt lifeless and shattered because her dreams as a young woman were trashed by this extremely painful event of her life. She always wanted to be a great mother because she never had a chance to be with her mother or have loving memories from her childhood and dreamed to give all that love and care to her child. This incident was a big pain in her life but the pain didn't stop there. She also got informed that her uterus was going to infect her other body parts so she would need to remove it as soon as possible. After getting the news that his wife can't bear a child, Akhila gets notice from her husband's family that she needs to leave the home as they need a child for their family lineage.

She left her husband's house immediately without getting more humiliated and disrespected for her lifelong loss. She knew that her father's place is always there for her and went back. But her father's reaction was not very welcoming for her as the society was already done with their work to taunt him for his daughter's loss and how she can't bear a child and thus is incomplete as a woman. All these 'acts' did not stop the love of a father but it affected the old father-daughter relationship.

She again started working with her father knowing the fact that the sea water is the reason for her infection as most of the fishing community women don't wear basic clothes like panties and only use clothes which they wrap around. This cloth comes in touch with the water and also gets washed and reused with all the secrecy which turns out in a way that they only get dried indoors or covered with other clothes. While knowing all the disadvantages and what happened to her because of the same work, she opted for it again as she didn't have any other option due to the



Fisherwomen of Odisha. Picture Credit: VIEWS

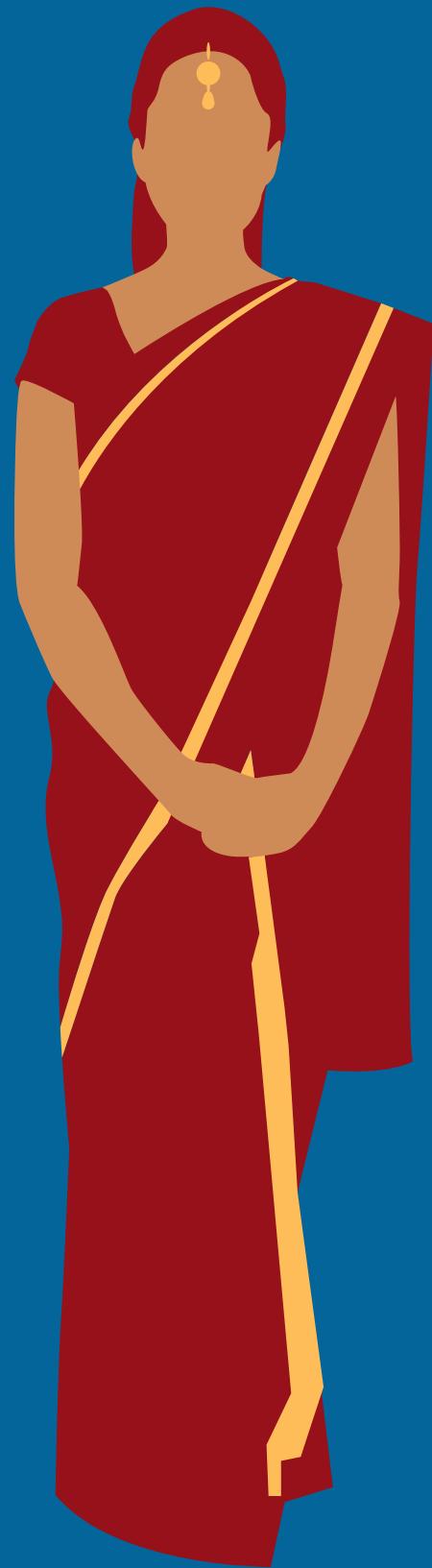
result of her poor educational background and not knowing any skills other than fishing. But this time she took menstrual hygiene precautions on her flow days to protect her from further problems. She eventually started using dry pads and wearing layers of clothes so that the sea water wouldn't come in direct contact with her body. During low income days when she couldn't afford pads, she would use cloth with panties and would discard them after using them once.

Weeks and months passed by like this and also the number of women in her community getting infected and becoming vulnerable because of the same continued to increase. Akhila got so disturbed to know the increasing number of cases and knowing the pain she decided to work on it and help other women in her community to be aware about menstrual hygiene practices and take precautions in her community. She is now a founding member of an NGO which works on menstrual hygiene and education of girls in the fishing community and also runs a pad making production unit by employing community SHG (Self-Help Group) women.

"A woman is not incomplete just because she can't have a baby, she is complete in herself."

BAD BLOOD

by srisruthi ramesh



BAD BLOOD

PART I: DISCOVERY

Monsoon rains had finally begun, so the rhythmic pattering against the rooftop gave Vidhya something to focus on. She was usually sandwiched between her brother and sister on their double bed, but her back ached on the thin mattress so she had moved to the floor. She hated everything about the bed anyway. She hated the dulling magenta and yellow zigzag pattern on the mattress and the faded blue bed sheet which shifted position the moment anyone sat on it. She hated that when her brother had exams, she and her younger sister, Varshini, had to sleep on the floor.

Anyway, it was probably best she didn't sleep next to them tonight in case they woke up to find her dead.

This is the thought that kept her awake now, almost 3:30am. It would be any day now, Vidhya told herself. She imagined how it would happen. Thinking about how she would die when she was awake was less frightening than when it came to her in nightmares. It would be painless, she reassured herself. But it would be slow, she could sense that. The blood would slowly leach out of her until her dark brown skin turned ashy and pale, like her grandmother had looked when they brought her body back from the hospital.

She was only nine years old then, but she remembered her *paati* vividly that day, wrapped tightly in a pure white cloth, with an enormous *mala* made of *sampangi* buds, marigolds, and *massi pacchai illai* strewn over her body. She was frightened by her mother's wailing, artificially louder than the rest of the women from the community who had gathered in her home, and even more by her father and uncle who had shaved off all their facial hair. Her grandmother could be harsh at times, especially toward Vidhya's mother. Life had hardened women of her generation. *Paati* was married at 11, sent away to finish her

childhood with a new family who changed everything she knew, even her name. But Vidhya's favorite meals were her grandmother's, Madras chicken curry and spicy fried okra. At least eating her cooking again was something Vidhya could look forward to soon. For a moment, she savored the thought, until she thought about her body, smaller and more youthful than anyone's should be at death, being paraded around the streets of Kuruchikuppam to the sound of peculiarly rowdy drum beats. Would her mother force herself to wait for Vidhya too, or would it come more naturally?

Vidhya could hear her stirring awake now through the thin concrete walls of their home. Nearly two more hours had passed. Vidhya snapped her eyes and legs tightly closed in a fake slumber when the tube light flickered once, twice, then on. She lay perfectly still as her mother entered the living room, which doubled as the children's sleep and study area, and crossed it to get to the kitchen. Vidhya woke up an hour later to the sound of her mother's familiar nasal-toned voice "*eirunthuru, eirunthuru! maani aachu!*" The realization that she had not succumbed overnight hit Vidhya as a wave of relief and dread.

Usually, Vidhya rode on the back of her father's bicycle to school. From there, he went to the pharmacy where he worked the cashier desk, stocked shelves, and made home deliveries. Appa had worked for the pharmacy owner, Raj Agarwal, since he was 18. He started out as just a delivery boy, but gradually took on more responsibilities while assuring Agarwal sir that he didn't need to hire more help. As a result, he was still the one woken up in the middle of the night to fulfill special deliveries, usually to Agarwal sir's wealthier customers or close friends.

Vidhya pleaded with her parents to let her walk to school today with her older brother Karun, whose campus was just opposite hers, lying that sitting on the bicycle wrinkled her school uniform and got her in trouble with

her headmistress. She trailed behind Karun and his friends for the twenty minute journey, keeping her eyes glued to the ground and trying not to fidget too much with her skirt.

Once at school, she rushed past her friends before they could recognize her by her distinctly long legs, her two tight pleats nearly smacking her in the face. In the bathroom, she pulled down her skirt, then her underwear. Then she pulled out one, two, three, four rolled up wads of cloth. She picked one up by the corner using just her index finger and thumb, and shook it gingerly to let it unravel. But even with just two fingers, she could tell it had tripled in weight.

“Vidhya!”

Her teacher’s sharp shout snapped Vidhya out from picturing that revolting cloth, previously a lovely mustard yellow.

“Sorry miss, yes miss?”

“You didn’t even listen to my question?” her teacher asked incredulously.

“Miss what question...” Vidhya trailed off as her classmates snickered.

A dark reddish brown paint splotch on the ground reminded her of the previous image in her head. She clicked her polished black shoes together to resist the urge to scrub the stain away.

“Get out of my classroom--go!”

The banishment didn’t come as a surprise. She gathered her school bag and walked toward the door, taking care to keep both legs less than an inch apart. If it weren’t for the knee-length, cornflower blue skirt covering most her movement, she would have raised suspicions awkwardly scooting across the room.

“Quickly!” her teacher commanded. “You’ve wasted enough of our time today!”

That she had wasted a lot of time was a sentiment that had never occurred to Vidhya until she knew how little time she would get in her life. Thinking about it now, she came up with a distressingly long list of regrets to have as a fourteen year old. And though getting in trouble at school would have otherwise been one more, she was relieved to leave class today. How could she possibly focus on any lesson when it was taking every ounce of her attention to stay alive, to will her flesh and blood to stay together just a little longer.

Radhika *athai*, her father’s sister, was not who Vidhya was expecting when her mom had urgently left the house. Vidhya had just returned home from school, walking back with some friends who lived in her neighborhood. She had been rude to her friend and neighbor, Shalini. “Who cares if Rajinikanth was seen buying fruit in Chennai? Is he coming here to give you the fruit that you keep talking endlessly about some man who doesn’t even know you exist?” Truthfully, Vidhya would have been equally giddy hearing this piece of celebrity gossip a few days ago. But today, it struck her as trivial and foolish. She thought maybe Shalini had cried and told her mother an outlandish version of the story, and Amma had gone over to apologize. She had barely walked past her mother, sweeping the entrance where they kept their shoes, all in disarray and piled carelessly on top of one another, when Amma had hurried off, telling Vidhya to stay put.

Radhika *athai* was her father’s younger sister. She was a petite woman who often wore *chudithar* sets instead of the traditional saree, and had recently gotten married to a man she fell in love with. She lived with his parents and younger brother in a newly painted three-bedroom home two crossings away from Vidhya’s own home. Unlike Vidhya’s mom, Radhika *athai* had graduated from college, an accomplishment she brought up at every opportunity possible, sometimes creating one when it did not arise. Two years into marriage and childless, Radhika *athai* worked as a receptionist at a photo studio in Town. She was headstrong and at times brazen, qualities Vidhya secretly admired, though she sensed she should not,

based on the comments her father and uncle made about their sister when she was not around. “*Thimiru piduchava ponnu,*” they called her. Arrogant girl.

When she came now, she was wearing a purple and yellow nylon synthetic saree with the excess cloth pulled around her back and tucked into her hip. Her hair was knotted into a tight bun, and she had a small white dot of *vibhuthi* on her forehead. Amma led her into the house and gestured towards Vidhya, who was fiddling with the First Place button she had won in her school’s science competition. She greeted her aunt while her mother left to make tea. Vidhya could hear Amma walk past the kitchen, to the open space in the back where Karun was playing bat-and-ball with a friend, and told him to go buy some milk.

“Go to a store on the main road,” she instructed. All the local shops will have sold out of milk by this time of day.”

Vidhya was listening to Karun’s protests when Radhika *aththai* spoke,

“Inga vaa kannu.”

Vidhya obeyed, dropping her school bag and moving toward her aunt. But to her surprise, her aunt got up as well. She followed her until she stopped outside the entrance to the bathroom, locked from the outside with a deadbolt. She leaned in close and spoke in a hushed voice.

“Use the washroom and change all your clothes. I’ll bring you another set.”

Vidhya was confused, but didn’t know what question to ask without revealing her secret, so did as she was told. When she pulled down her skirt and looked at it, she realized why her aunt had told her to change clothes.

There it was, the discovery that had haunted her for days, plainly visible for everyone to see. Horrified, Vidhya called out for her aunt who was standing outside with clothes as promised, a frilly, floor length skirt and long graphic t-shirt. She put on everything except the new underwear, unsure how she could replace the wads of cloth without her aunt noticing.

“Did you use what was inside the underwear?” Radhika *aththai* asked.

Since she hadn’t opened the folded underwear, Vidhya hadn’t noticed the piece of newspaper tucked inside it. She unwrapped it and found a narrow, oddly shaped item, pillowy and white like cotton, but with a plastic film on the bottom which was slightly sticky. It took a moment for Vidhya to remember where she had seen this before: flashing on their television screen for a moment, before her father or grandfather flipped the channel.

“Vidhya, you must use this also, stick it into your underwear,” her aunt instructed, demonstrating now by pressing the pad into the inner lining of the underwear she had hidden it within.

“Go back inside and put this on.”

Vidhya wanted to ask how much her aunt knew about her *noi*, about the cancer that was spreading through her body, tugging at her lower back and twisting the insides of her stomach, making room for itself by forcing out what was already living there. The sudden bursts were unpredictable and unstoppable, no matter how tight Vidhya closed her legs. Sometimes strange dark clumps came out along with her blood. These scared Vidhya the most. She feared they were bits of her insides, her organs slowly disintegrating and falling out as the disease ravaged her body. She wanted to know what the soft underwear insert would do. Would it ease the pain, or maybe catch her blood so the doctors could somehow put it back in her body? But she didn’t want her aunt to know that it had already been three days since the bleeding started, to realize it was probably too late for medicine. Vidhya didn’t want Radhika *aththai* to tell her mother that her child was dying from the inside out, expiring in front of her own eyes.

PART II: CELEBRATION

The giant banner erected outside their home made her feel like a movie star. “மஞ்சள் நிராட்டு விழா R. மீனாட்சி (Manjal Neeradu Veezha – R. Meenakshi)” it read,

proclaiming Meena's coming-of-age beside an enormous photo of her in a half-saree. Her mother had taken her to a photo studio where a relative worked to take it, expecting, or perhaps praying, that this day would arrive soon and without further complications. It was Meena's first professional photo aside from the headshots they took at her school each year. Her father had spent far more on Meena's older sister's first period ceremony, but Meena couldn't remember that day anyway and so she did not feel slighted.

She was wearing a new outfit her *mama*, her mother's older brother, had given her. It was her first half-saree made of pure silk, a golden yellow and pink checkered skirt with a matching blouse and royal blue body. Meena had been excited when her uncle handed her a colorful cardboard box tucked inside a Donald Duck gift bag. But now she felt that she liked the wrapping more than what was inside. The silk was itchy and the blouse a little too tight for her thick arms, which she couldn't move because of how tightly the saree was pinned at her shoulder. She sat in the center of her living room, on a large throne decorated lavishly with fake gemstones that reflected the sunlight into her eye. On top of all this, she felt an unfamiliar yanking in her stomach and thighs.

Her mother had already scolded her harshly when she fought against wearing the saree, so Meena tried her best to ignore these discomforts and focus on the presents. More and more streamed in with each guest, people she did not recognize because they had not come to see Meena when she was born after hearing the news. They showed up now, however, carrying giant stainless steel plates of apples, coconuts, jaggery, sweet *laddus*, betel nut leaves, and, from a few close family, gold. Meena was most excited about the sweets.

Everyone, hosts and guests alike, seemed to have an assigned task. They fluttered around her busily, shifting the plates of gifts from one mat to another, instructing the *nathaswaram* player to change the music, or ushering male guests to the eating area. Meena's teacher and her mother's aunt were the only ones who handed her their presents directly. They greeted her lovingly and spread

sandalwood paste on her cheek. Though she did not like the chill of the sandalwood, or how it made her face stiff once it dried, Meena was happy to see a few familiar faces and so she did not resist.

The majority of the guests were uncomfortable approaching Meena. They didn't know how to interact with someone like her. And for her part, she did not like to interact with new people either. She knew they would try to look at her straight in the eye or ask questions she didn't understand. Sometimes, she tried to share what she was thinking using her hands and feet along with her words. But at these times, they looked at her with bewilderment. The worst was when they shifted their bodies away from her to make sure her ligaments did not touch their own.

Mostly, only her mother spoke to her. Amma knelt beside her giant chair, adjusting her pleats while feeding her small handfuls of lemon rice. The celebration was almost over, she promised. Her *mama* had already performed the mandatory rituals of adorning his niece with a garland of roses, rubbing sandalwood paste on her face, and presenting her with gold jewelry. For Meena, it had been a thin gold chain with a round pendant of Goddess Lakshmi, her mother's namesake.

They were just waiting for the last guests, Meena's father and his parents. Finally, she heard Arunachalam's gruff voice calling out "*enga irrukaa?*" as though the crowd was so large he could not spot his own daughter. Meena was slumped in her chair. It had been nearly three hours since the celebrations began, and she had no energy left for decorum. Her uncle told her to sit up straight as her father and grandparents approached. Her grandparents handed her a boxed gift, likely another itchy saree, and her father placed an envelope on her lap. He patted her head, hesitated for a moment, then carried his palm down her face to caress her cheek, the base of his palm not quite touching her.

Arun was a hefty man and Meena had taken after him in appearance. He had a stubbornness that suggested what

he was fighting for was a well-thought out argument and not petulance. It was this unchallenged bravado that had brought him and his parents to Meena's grandparents' doorstep one afternoon to request their daughter's hand in marriage. Arun had spotted her leaving school and followed her home for several days, deciding he liked her big eyes and awkward saunter, as though she was intentionally walking slower than her long legs could carry her. Meena's grandparents, thrilled to get a suitor poised to inherit his father's tailoring shop, quickly agreed. They felt they had hit the jackpot finding a man with a stable income, proper manners, and reasonable dowry requests.

And for several years, Meena's mother had felt the same. Arun was a decent man, charming even. He spoke coarsely but respectfully. He was a good tailor and a smarter businessman. From his early 20s, he had started volunteering with a local political party. A year after his marriage, his party's candidate defeated the sitting MLA to come into power. Arun tailored all of the collared shirts and *veshtis* for the party members for free, and in return, they referred him to everyone they knew. Within a few years, his business grew enough to hire two additional tailors. With the help of his political connections, he bought out the Muslim-owned leather shoe store next to him and expanded his shop.

Arun's marriage ending in divorce came as a shock to the local people who held him in high-esteem, though several families had not waited long before offering their daughters to him for a second try. He had a reputation as a man of duty, which is why he agreed to pay for Meena's coming-of-age ceremony. He used today to further his public good will. His marriage had not dissolved due to any of the reasons anyone, both sets of Meena's grandparents included, could understand: regular physical abuse or an affair. Nor had it been for any of the modern reasons couples split up, what the divorce documents labeled "irreconcilable differences": money disputes or disagreements between wives and in-laws. It had fallen apart because of Meena.

Two years ago, when she was 13, Meena heard her grandmother say, because she had not tried to whisper, "the day that cursed girl was brought back home was the day our daughter signed her divorce papers. The day she threw her life away." She had shaken her head vigorously and slapped her forehead twice, making a hollow thudding noise.

Perhaps she thought Meena could not understand, or was not paying attention because her eyes were pointed elsewhere. But she had. And because she did not know what to say, because tears were not enough, when her mother came to feed her that night, Meena refused to eat. She hurled the plate of food across the room and watched the *sambar* stain the fading mint green paint, the precious, still-warm *idlis* hit the wall before crumbling to the floor.

PART III: CURSED

Vidhya was rubbing ointment on her forearm where the glass shard had cut her. The evening breeze felt soothing against the wound. She dabbed away trailing droplets of blood with the edge of her sari and laid flat on a straw mat. She inhaled deeply, willing the oxygen down her spine to the spot on her lower back that was throbbing. It was her first period since her daughter was born three months ago. For the first time since she moved to her husband's home, she was grateful for the forced isolation.

At the beginning of their marriage, her husband was an affectionate man, if too passionate. On their first Valentine's Day, he bought her an enormous white teddy bear, one holding a shimmering red heart that read 'I LOVE YOU'. Vidhya felt lucky that, despite having an arranged marriage, her husband was madly in love with her. But her in-laws had been less thrilled. They blamed Vidhya for the neighbors who ogled at their son when he carried the toy home. "What is she, a child to demand such things from him!" they sneered. "Shameless."

Her in-laws were more orthodox than her own parents had been. After moving into their house, Vidhya had to learn many new practices. Among them were a separate set of

rules when she was menstruating. She had to wake up at 4AM to bathe before the rest of the household, and she was not allowed on the bed with her husband for the first three days of her period; she slept on a mat designated for this time of the month. On some nights, like this one, she slept on the terrace or rooftop, taking advantage of the fact that Puducherry's unrelenting summer heat made for warm outdoor nights.

Within a few months, her husband's infatuation with her wore off. He spent more and more time, nearly every evening and weekend, at his political party headquarters. He came home well past dinner time, drenched in the stench of liquor. When she protested his consecutive tardiness, pointing out that she could not eat dinner until he finished his, he yelled that it was only because of her that he worked so long.

A few times, he hit her. It was never the slap itself that stung the most; Vidhya's father had dealt those out on occasion too. It was the public spectacle he made it into. Violence was his teaching tool. He used it to reprimand her in front of others, his parents or friends from the party office, who were in agreement that hers was unacceptable behavior from a wife. Even enraged, her husband was a clever man. He did not hit her often enough or hard enough for her to claim physical abuse. His eyes would flicker wide, then narrow, in the instant before he lifted his thick palm up toward his ear and sent it flying flat across her cheek. No one even looked away.

Vidhya had even less bargaining power after their second daughter was born.

"You think I can sit at home all day and you will all be fed and clothed happily? And for all I've given you, look what I get in return. Two girl children, one like this. You are a cursed woman. And now you have the gall to blame me."

His frustration was warranted, Vidhya felt. Not only had she not given him any sons to take over his business one day, but she had forced him to feed and clothe a daughter he did not want.

"Who is there to help me?" he barked tonight, throwing

the tabletop analog clock Karun had gifted him for his birthday to the ground. The glass insert shattered, sending a shard slicing across Vidhya's arm. Though she glared for a moment before fleeing the room, it did not occur to Vidhya then to ask him the very same question.

Laying on the rooftop now, she thought back to a story Radhika *atthai* once told her. Her aunt was explaining how to dispose of sanitary napkins once they were saturated.

"Peel it off your underwear, then strip the soiled cotton away from the plastic lining. You can throw away the plastic. Wash the cotton out with water and squeeze the blood out. Then wrap it in newspaper, put the newspaper in a separate trash bag, and throw it away. Keep it hidden, make sure no one sees you throwing it."

"Why should I wash it if I am going to throw it away?" Vidhya had blurted out, quickly regretting that she had challenged her aunt's instruction.

But Radhika *atthai* had just laughed.

"Well, *kanna*, I'm not entirely sure. My Amma, your *paati*, once told me that if a snake touches your menstrual blood, even by mistake, you will be cursed. Everyone was very worried about snakes in the *ghramam* she grew up in."

Vidhya had wanted to point out then that they did not live in a village anymore, that she had never even seen a snake, let alone heard of a kind that could identify you by your blood. But that time, she resisted the impulse.

But remembering it now, she wondered if perhaps her husband was right. Maybe, back when she was young and irresponsible and sometimes too lazy to strip and wash the cotton, when she had instead surreptitiously rolled the whole pad in newspaper and tossed it by the roadside, a snake had come across it. Maybe it had found her used sanitary napkin, slithered over her bad blood, and cursed her for life.

A soft *thud thud thud* came from the staircase. Her older daughter, Sangita, appeared under the rooftop doorway.

"Amma, Amma, the baby is crying! I tried calming her

down. But she won't stop. Come Amma, she wants you."

Before her daughters were born, the period rules Vidya loathed the most were about food. Her mother-in-law had an endless list of what she could and could not eat. Papaya and all non-vegetarian food was strictly forbidden, even though many times while on her period, Vidhya craved chicken curry. She was also banned from touching the rice, vegetables, and boiled drinking water in the kitchen. Her mother-in-law built her a plate, usually of vegetable curry and *puttu*, a dry coconut rice dish, and handed it to her. Vidhya had to eat separately from the family. But motherhood had changed her. It was no longer her own hunger that hurt her.

Vidhya got up from her mat and walked downstairs. She could hear her husband's bellowing laughter in the kitchen. She guessed he was on his third glass of whiskey. She pressed her ear to the bedroom door where her baby was wailing uncontrollably. Her heart broke knowing she was not allowed to touch her, to offer her a breast to suck on, or to rock her gently to sleep. Especially because she knew that for this child, no one else would.

PART IV: NON-VERBAL

Meena was reluctant to let go of her mother's hand. She squeezed it tighter and shook her head emphatically, as far left and right as it would go. She continued even when her ears started to ring. They tried tugging her away. She grunted softly, a wordless plea she hoped her mom would understand. She usually did, but Meena was not so sure anymore. When they left the house today, Amma did not let her bring her favorite white teddy bear.

PART V: RELEASE

Today was her daughter's first day of school. Vidhya wasn't sure this day would come, that she could make it this long on her own.

"Surname?" the administrator asked her at the registration desk.

Vidhya realized her daughter did not actually have one. Traditionally, a child's surname is her father's first name. But Vidhya's husband had refused to put his name on the birth certificate when their daughter was born, insisting that they put her up for adoption. Even after Vidhya fought and cried and brought her child home, he never agreed to make it official.

"You can put down my name," she said. "Vidhyalakshmi."

The school administrator led her into another room where several people, mostly women, were sitting with their children. Some of the other new students looked very young, maybe four or five years old. But some, like hers, looked at least eight or nine. Vidhya gripped her daughter's hand a little tighter and shuffled to an empty spot in the back of the room.

"*Vaange, vaange,*" the Headmistress said genially, pausing her introduction to welcome Vidhya personally.

"You haven't missed anything important yet," she promised.

Vidhya's cheeks flushed at the unexpected attention, and she quickly took her seat. The Headmistress continued, finishing up her explanation of the school's history and going on to chart out their many unique services: physical, occupational, and speech therapy sessions, individualized education plans for each child, and even parent support groups.

"Your child is special to us. We will always treat them that way. From this day onward, you are not alone."

Her face was serious but kind. Vidhya suddenly felt an overwhelming, desperate longing to believe her.

After the Headmistress' speech, a young woman approached Vidhya and her daughter, who was clutching her mother's hand but gazing up in wonder at the exceptionally tall ceiling.

"Ma'am, my name is Sivapriya. I work specifically with children with Cerebral Palsy. I'll be your daughter's teacher this year. Let's have some tea and then I will show you around our school," she offered.

After the tour, Sivapriya suggested Vidhya introduce herself to the other mothers while she took her daughter next door to take an official school photo. Vidhya admired that to speak to her daughter, the teacher got down on her knees but was mindful of keeping her distance. Sivapriya attempted for some time to coax the child away from her mother. But Vidhya's daughter, stubborn as ever, vehemently refused. Once she started her soft grunting, Vidhya knew the battle was lost. She thanked Sivapriya for her patience before they left.

By the time they returned home, the child was in good spirits again. She stayed outside to play while Vidhya went in to prepare dinner. It would just be for two tonight, since Sangita was at her father's house. Though it had been nearly eight years since she left that family, Vidhya still remembered today was her father-in-law's birthday. He had requested to spend it with his granddaughter, so Sangita had gone.

Vidhya used her palms to approximate a half of a cup of rice. She rinsed the grains thoroughly before immersing them in water and placed the pot in the pressure cooker. She diced onions while frying cumin seeds, dried red chilli, chopped garlic, ginger, and green chillies in a saute pan. After a few minutes, she added in the onions, along with garam masala, turmeric, coriander powder, black pepper, fennel, and curry leaves. She began chopping tomatoes

and a small chicken breast into squares.

The cooker released a shrill whistle and a concentrated puff of steam. It was the first day of her period, so Vidhya was making Madras chicken curry, the way her *paati* prepared it. The pan was sizzling now, the spices coating the small room with their warm, spicy fragrance. She tossed in the tomatoes, chicken, and a spoonful of thick, homemade yogurt as the pressure cooker blew its second whistle. Vidhya leaned against the countertop, listening to the steadily rising hum coming from inside the steel drum, the sound of pressure building up inside. The next whistle wouldn't take long; the tension built up faster between each release. The cooker let out its final long, loud exhale. Vidhya turned the stove off and walked outside where her daughter was sprinkling yellow *kolum* powder on the ground in the shape of sun.

"Meena!" she called out. "*Ulla vaa kannu--dinner is ready.*"

Author's Note: "Bad blood" is how the women I met in Puducherry would describe menstruation. Folklore such as that of snake cursing you furthered their belief that period blood is impure. It became a sort of anthem of my project to combat this particular phrase, "bad blood," to put an end to the moralizing of women's bodies and the natural processes it goes through.

GLOSSARY OF TAMIL WORDS & PHRASES

Tamil English

Amma: Mom or Mother

Appa: Dad or Father

Atthai: Paternal aunt

Chudithar: A combination dress worn by South Asian women, a modern variation of the traditional salwar kameez. The pants of this clothing set, called a pyjama, are tightly fit like leggings rather than loose flowing.

"Eirunthuru, eirunthuru! maani aachu": "Get up, get up! It is getting late!"

"Enga irrukaa?": "Where is she?"

Grahmam: Village

Idlis: A South Indian dish made of steamed fermented rice batter, typically having a soft, dry cake like texture

"Inga vaa (kanna)": "Come here (small one)" Also see Kanna definition.

Kanna : A term of endearment used to address children or loved ones, such as "dear"

Kolum: A type of floor chalk drawing made with rice flour often used in its natural white color or synthetically colored. These designs are often found at the entrance to buildings in South Asia. Also known as Rangoli in Hindi.

Laddus: A round sweet, originating in the Indian subcontinent, made of gram flour, clarified butter and sugar.

Mala: Garland

Mama: Maternal uncle

Manjal Neeradu Veezha: A traditional ceremony performed in South Indian villages to announce the onset of a girl's menarche.

Massi pacchai illai: A type of green leaf from the betel nut plant traditionally used in garland making. In India, such garlands are used in major ceremonies adoring the deceased for a funeral.

Nathaswaram: A traditional wind instrument, similar to a trumpet, native to South India and popular in large ceremonies such as weddings or funerals.

Noi: Disease

Paati: Grandmother

Puttu: A type of rice dish made of steamed cylinders of ground rice layered with coconut shavings, sometimes with a sweet or savory filling on the inside. Popular in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and other South Indian states as a breakfast dish.

Sambar: A spicy lentil soup popular in South Indian cuisine; often mixed with rice or as an accompaniment with dishes such as idli. Also see Idli definition.

Sampangi: A type of small white flower traditionally used in garland making. In India, such garlands are used in major ceremonies adoring the deceased for a funeral.

Thimiru piduchava ponnu: Arrogant girl

Ulla vaa kanna: "Come inside (small one)". Also see Kanna definition.

Vaange, vaange: "Come in, come in"

Veshtis: A traditional lower garment worn by men in India, typically in white with a thin colorful border and resembling a sarong. Also known as a dhoti in Hindi or mundu in Malayalam.

Vibhuthi: A Hindu religious marking of a line of white ash on the forehead.

CONCLUSION

by

JANICE D'SOUZA, MPH

India is a country of contrasts, with extreme wealth and poverty and gender-related disparities, resulting in significant variation in health and social indicators among girls and women. When I was an AIF Clinton Fellow in 2015–16, my work revolved around menstruation in India, and the role it has in the retention of girls in the government schools. The qualitative research I was part of revolved around myths related to menstruation in women's and girls' lives. Since my fellowship, I have continued to work in reproductive health and examine the intersectionality and gaps in the menstrual hygiene field. Experiencing menstruation without proper structural environments, resources, information, and support may impact women's and girls' sense of agency, self-esteem, confidence, bodily autonomy, and educational experiences. Given the impacts of inadequate resources and support for menstrual hygiene management (MHM), addressing these needs for women and girls is a public health priority.

Structural challenges include the scant provision of clean water and soap, sanitation infrastructure, private places to clean and change, and disposal facilities. Resources, like commercial menstrual products, may be unavailable or cost-prohibitive, prompting rural and poor women and girls to use available materials such as cloth from old clothing and cotton. Improvising sanitary materials can place women and girls at risk for leaks and discomfort depending on the quantity and quality of materials accessible, and the improper cleaning and drying of these materials for reuse may potentially lead to infection. The latter is a popular claim in the MHM space, although more research is needed to validate this connection (Garg, Anand, & care, 2015).

Barring these structural and resource barriers, women and girls face misinformation and social support challenges: girls are often unprepared, uninformed, and lack adequate support for understanding and managing menarche, menstruation, and puberty, resulting in fear and uncertainty (Geertz, 2016). The taboo and stigma around menstruation can lead to secrecy, shame, decreased mobility, social and religious restrictions, and impact confidence and self-efficacy. Numerous studies report girls being caught unaware by menarche, and their subsequent feelings of stress, anxiety, depression, dirtiness, and anger. While the importance of puberty education is universally recognized, the question of who should educate girls is debated. India's National Health Mission programme has involved the female community health worker for this purpose with variable results, with mothers identified as the most frequent information source (Muralidharan, Patil, & Patnaik, 2015). An MHM package thus needs to strengthen mothers' practical MHM knowledge to support girls, while schools teach physiology. Many countries resolve this through age and culture appropriate sex and relationship packages in the school curricula, to familiarise children with puberty changes (Sommer, Sutherland, & Chandra-Mouli, 2015).

While there has been growing recognition of menstrual hygiene management (MHM) as a public health issue, our understanding of how menstruation is experienced is primarily focused on school girls' experiences in low and middle-income countries (Van Eijk et al., 2016). Anecdotally, we know that older women are also left in the dark about what is happening to their bodies. Menstrual concerns extend beyond adolescence, and a focus on women's experience with menstruation in later stages of

life is also essential. Moving forward, there is still a lot of tangible work to be done in this field that international development professionals can and should be a part of.

Works Cited:

Garg, S., Anand, T. J. J. o. f. m., & care, p. (2015). Menstruation related myths in India: strategies for combating it. *4*(2), 184.

Geertz, A. (2016). *An opportunity to address menstrual health and gender equity*: FSG.

Muralidharan, A., Patil, H., & Patnaik, S. J. W. (2015).

Unpacking the policy landscape for menstrual hygiene management: implications for school Wash programmes in India. 79-91.

Sommer, M., Sutherland, C., & Chandra-Mouli, V. J. R. h. (2015). Putting menarche and girls into the global population health agenda. *12*(1), 1-3.

Van Eijk, A. M., Sivakami, M., Thakkar, M. B., Bauman, A., Laserson, K. F., Coates, S., & Phillips-Howard, P. A. J. B. o. (2016). Menstrual hygiene management among adolescent girls in India: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *6*(3).

CONTRIBUTORS & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

thank you to the women of india

for inspiring this anthology, for braving these fears, for sharing your stories with us, and for speaking up for the well-being of the women in your communities

special thanks to

RURAL INDIA SUPPORTING TRUST

YUWA - ORMANJHI, JHARKHAND

SATYA SPECIAL SCHOOL - PUDUCHERRY

VOLUNTARY INTEGRATION FOR EDUCATION AND WELFARE OF SOCIETY (VIEWS) - GOPALPUR, ODISHA

VISION-AID - VISAKHAPATNAM, ANDHRA PRADESH

NIHARIKA BAXLA, CHILD DEVELOPMENT OFFICER, YUWA

JANICE D'SOUZA, MPH EMORY '20 & AIF CLINTON FELLOWSHIP ALUMNA 2015-2016

SRISRUTHI RAMESH, ANTHOLOGY CONCEPT AND ILLUSTRATIONS, OTHER THAN THOSE WITH SPECIAL CREDITS

JANE HAMMAKER

Jane served as an AIF Clinton Fellow with Yuwa in Ormanjhi, Jharkhand. For her Fellowship project, she developed a life skills curriculum for adolescent girls from vulnerable backgrounds around sports-based training to enhance education, build confidence, and improve health. She thanks the Yuwa community for welcoming her with open arms, and for their willingness and vulnerability in sharing their stories with her. After the Fellowship, Jane will continue working with Yuwa as a Distance-Learning Educator.



PALLAVI DESHPANDE

Pallavi served as an AIF Clinton Fellow with Vision Aid in Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh. Her Fellowship Project has involved creating content for Vision Aid's Online Academy, which trains teachers, partners, and organizations to deliver accessible and quality educational interventions to the visually impaired and developing a 6-month scholarship program aimed at holistic skill development and tangible empowerment for the visually impaired from rural, semi-urban, and marginalized backgrounds in Andhra Pradesh.

SAHANA AFREEN

Sahana served as an AIF Clinton Fellow with VIEWS (Voluntary Integration for Education and Welfare of Society) in Ganjam, Odisha. For her Fellowship project she worked with the tribal community of the district to work on the livelihood opportunity with them and conducted several village and cluster level meetings to motivate the Women's Self-Help Group members to adopt a more organic way of farming with the existing resources in the community. She also worked with the fishing community of Ganjam district, Odisha. She facilitated menstrual hygiene solution workshops with young girls, SHG members and Co-Ed schools.



SRISRUTHI RAMESH

Sri was an AIF Clinton Fellow with Satya Special School based in Karuvadikuppam, Puducherry. Her project was an initiative called "I Too Am a Woman" on menstrual hygiene, reproductive health, and sexual abuse prevention for women with disabilities. Her research assessing the attitudes of caretakers of women with disabilities towards these topics was selected for presentation at two international conferences. Sri is from the San Francisco Bay Area with family roots in Chennai. She loves storytelling, namely women-focused and historical fiction, as a tool for social change.

