Final paper
15 higher education credits

“Wash your hair and keep a lemon”
-the experience of menstruation among adolescent girls in South India

“Tvätta håret och bär med en citron”
- Tonårstjejers upplevelse av menstruation i Södra Indien

Kerstin Jurlander

Teacher Education, 300 ECTS
Religion education

Examiner: Pierre Wiktorin
Supervisor: Bodil Liljefors-Persson

2012-06-04
Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to give an understanding about how adolescent girls in rural Tamil Nadu experience menstruation. Aspects on access to information, hygiene and traditional menstrual customs are discussed. The initiation rite that all girls go through is connected to ritual theory by Turner, Bell, Rappaport and Staal et al. An understanding from the anthropological field is given through the work of Buckley and Gottlieb. Central for the thesis is notions about impurity and pollution, which are discussed with the theories of Mary Douglas. The mainly qualitative research consists of focus groups interviews with girls in the age of 12-25 years and complementary interviews with NGO workers and others connected to the field. A questionnaire study was conducted as well as an observation. The results from the study show that adolescent girls are in great need of more reproductive knowledge and that there could be benefits to further bring up the traditional customs to discussion, since part of them make girls feel uncomfortable. It is seen that there is a need for comfortable, hygienic and sustainable solutions for women’s sanitary protection. Presented in the thesis are also different examples of projects that aim to spread information about menstruation and the use of sanitary pads.

Keywords: Menstruation, adolescent girls, India, Tamil, tradition, hygiene, NGOs, initiation rites, puberty, reproductive knowledge
# Table of Contents

Preface .................................................................................................................................. 7

1. Introductions ....................................................................................................................... 8
   1.1 Reasons for the study ........................................................................................................ 8
   1.2 Purpose and Study questions .......................................................................................... 9
   1.3 Background .................................................................................................................... 10
      1.3.1 Culture and Geographical area .............................................................................. 10
      1.3.2 NGO project for adolescent girls ......................................................................... 12

2. Theoretical framework ........................................................................................................... 14
   2.1 Defining ritual ................................................................................................................ 14
   2.2 Rites of Passage ............................................................................................................. 15
   2.3 The Anthropology of Menstruation ............................................................................. 17
   2.4 Impurity and Pollution .................................................................................................. 18

3. Previous research ................................................................................................................... 20
   3.1 Socio-economical aspects of menstruation in an urban slum ....................................... 20
   3.2 Menstrual practices among adolescent girls in Rajasthan ......................................... 21
   3.3 Menstrual traditions, health and knowledge among adolescent girls in South India ............................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................ 22
   3.4 Hindu women’s thoughts on menstrual restrictions ....................................................... 24

4. Methodology ........................................................................................................................... 26
   4.1 Qualitative method ......................................................................................................... 26
   4.2 Informants ....................................................................................................................... 26
   4.3 Interpreter ......................................................................................................................... 29
   4.4 Interviews ......................................................................................................................... 30
   4.5 Questionnaire ................................................................................................................ 30
   4.6 Analyses of empirical material ..................................................................................... 31
   4.7 Ethical aspects ................................................................................................................ 31

5. Coming of Age- Empirical material and Analysis ................................................................ 33
   5.1.1 Lack of Information ................................................................................................. 33
   5.1.2 To not know your body ............................................................................................ 37
   5.2.1 Change of Social Status .......................................................................................... 38
Preface

This thesis is a result of two exiting and worthwhile travels to India. The first one established the contacts and introduced me to the area and the topic. During the second one I conducted the research, within the Minor Field Studies programme (MFS).

I would like to thank my supervisor at Malmö University, Bodil Liljefors-Persson, who has supported and helped me through the whole process, from the MFS application to completed thesis.

I also want to thank SIDA for making the study possible through the MFS programme, and for encouraging students to learn about global issues and sustainable development.

My appreciation goes to all the people at CIRHEP for making this possible, especially Shatia and Madu for doing the valuable work with arrangements, translations and interpretation.

And finally I send a special thought to K.A Chandra, who has not only taking the absolutely best care of me, but with her work has convinced me that another world is possible.

Thank you!
1. Introduction

1.1 Reasons for the study

My first travel Tamil Nadu in South India was in 2010 with the Swedish NGO Future Earth (Framtidsjorden). I stayed for five months as a volunteer at a local NGO called Centre for Improved Rural Health and Environmental Protection (CIRHEP). CIRHEP works for rural development with the mission to “create a sustainable human – ecology relationship and improve the quality of rural life by striving to alleviate poverty, provide education and conserve the environment with active participation of the rural community” (CIRHEP webpage). Projects at CIRHEP include water and soil preservation, organic farming, women’s self help groups, Eco Clubs for children and the last addition, groups for adolescent girls. I became involved in the adolescent group project, and working with the project leader, and my volunteer partner, I organised group meetings about menstruation and gave instructions on how to make reusable sanitary pads with cloth.

Though I gained a great deal of knowledge working with the adolescent groups, I felt that there were much more left that I wanted to know concerning the conditions and minds of the girls I met. When I was working with the groups I was focused on teaching the girls about menstruation and puberty. Now I want to focus on learning and researching. I had the possibility to go back to CIRHEP to do a field study with the support of the SIDA programme, Minor field studies (MFS). The MFS programme intends to give students opportunity to get practical experience from developing countries and a preparation to work with global issues. It also aims to strengthen international networks and research between the universities.

I stayed for two months in Tamil Nadu to interview girls from the adolescent groups, carry out a small questionnaire study and meet with other groups and people who also work with these issues. I wanted to learn more about how the girls are experiencing menstruation, including aspects such as access to information, hygiene and traditional customs and beliefs. When the project for the adolescent girls continues, with the support from foreign NGOs and volunteers, I hope that this thesis can contribute with an understanding of the girls situation and the notions of menstruation in the Indian context. This can especially be valuable for non-Indians that will come in contact with CIRHEPs work and the adolescent groups. I also hope that Indian readers will find it worthwhile to read about their own culture in the eyes of an outsider.
There is a need for the situation of teenage girls to be prioritised in India, as part of the bigger struggle for the emancipation of women. Menstruation is a big part of every girl’s life and it can create feelings of discomfort and annoyance. My study shows that the rural girls of Tamil Nadu get very little information about physical aspects of menstruation and the importance of hygiene. When menstruation is discussed in the families it is in relation to the restrictions a menstruating woman needs to follow due to the impure state she is considered to be in. In addition, the schools cover very little about reproductive issues in their curriculum. When a girl gets her first menstruation she is put in seclusion for some days. This rite of passage is followed by a ceremony where the whole family and parts of the village take part. The thesis discusses what consequences the lack of information can lead to and how the girls think about the traditional menstruation customs, as well as issues concerning menstrual hygiene.

In my future profession as a teacher, I would like to work with global issues on sustainable development. I believe it is important for Swedish pupils to get an understanding and insight on international development and I would like to incorporate this in my teaching. As a teacher it will be a great resource to have personal experience from working in the field in a developing country and to have conducted research in a culture that is not my own. The experience to have observed and analysed rituals and notions in the hindu context will be of great benefits within my subject on religion studies.

With this study I want to contribute to an understanding about the different aspects of menstruation and conditions for teenage girls in Tamil Nadu. Hopefully, the thesis will encourage the work to improve the rights of girls and women in India.

1.2 Purpose and Study questions

The aim of this study is to get an understanding of menstrual practice among adolescent girls in rural Tamil Nadu, South India and how the community reacts when a girl comes into puberty as well as how the girls themselves experience menstruation, and the social aspects connected to the menstruation. I also want to examine what kind of initiatives are taken to improve the situation for the girls. These are my study questions:

- What is the experience of menstruation among adolescent girls in rural Tamil Nadu, India?
- What kind of information regarding menstruation do the girls receive?
- Which traditional Hindu customs connected to menstruation are practiced?
- How do the girls feel about these customs?
- What is the custom regarding menstrual hygiene among the girls?

1.3 Background

1.3.1 Culture and geographical area

India is a federation of states, where each state has a high degree of autonomy and there are often large differences in culture between the states, for example different languages. This study was performed in the very south east state, called Tamil Nadu. The people of Tamil Nadu are called Tamils and they speak the language Tamil. People in Tamil Nadu have traditionally been, and still are, very protective of their politically autonomy and their Tamil culture. The largest religion is, like in the rest of the country, Hinduism. In general it is hard to talk about Hinduism as a homogenous religion. The word Hinduism can be seen as a wide term, that comprehend a group of religious movements, although with some important common denominators (Jacobsen 2004:12). Hindus make no clear distinction between religion and society or religion and culture, which is common in Western thoughts (Fuller 2004: 9). Tamil Nadu has in many cases its own form of Hindu traditions. In this thesis I will sometimes refer to practices as more generally Hindu practice, Hindu beliefs, Hindu tradition etc. and sometimes more specific as Tamil tradition.

The research area is located in the district of Dindigul in the inland of Tamil Nadu. It is a rural semi arid area where most families are engaged in small scale agriculture. Living standards are generally low, with the minimum common, monthly salary being of 3000 rupees (43 euros/month). Around 60 % of the children go to school up to 12\textsuperscript{th} grade and around 30 % continue to higher education. Most of the girls usually start working or get married after they finished 10-12\textsuperscript{th} grade. The number of girls that go to colleges or universities has started to increase, but is still low in this area, with around 15 % (K.A. Chandra, personal contact). Most of the families live in simple houses, with no access to toilet facilities. There are health care centres and hospitals in the area, but health
care costs are often too high for the families for it to be prioritised.

India’s caste system is officially discussed and referred to in terms of Forward cast (Brahmins), Backward casts and Schedule casts (Dalits). Groups from backward and schedule casts are prioritized by the government in different ways and are given some benefits, like scholarships and special quotas. The Backward cast represent the biggest part of the population in this area, and to this category all different casts that is not Brahmin, Dalit or tribal groups belong. In the villages where I have conducted my research most people belong to Backward communities and some families to Schedule communities. The Dalits from the schedule communities are still suffering from lower socio-economic resources and discrimination. According to a project leader at CIRHEP, the situation for the schedule communities in the study area has changed a lot, and nowadays the differences is not as bad as it used to be (K.A Chandra). The cast system could obviously be of interest in all kind of studies in the Indian society. However, it is a complicated system to grasp for an outsider and something you normally do not discuss openly. Since the cast belonging is not essential for my study I have not consider this as a factor in my research.

The Tamil society is patrilineal, which means that a child receives his or her social identity from the father, as well as patrilocal, which means that the bride moves in with her husband’s family. Most families live in joint households where different generations of the same family live together. The extended family, which has a broad definition, plays an extremely important role in the society and for the individual. What one family member do, effects the whole extended family. The reigning custom when it comes to marriage is that the parents arrange the husband or wife of their children. Love marriage occurs but are very uncommon in rural areas. However it happens in the villages every year that boys and girls fall in love and run away together, and break with their families. For the arranged marriages a dowry, that can be huge amounts of money and property, is paid by the girl’s family to the groom’s family. This custom, which is actually banned by national law, creates a desire for boy children and affects the low status of women. Hindu women are in general subordinated to men and do not have the same legal rights as men (for example to inherent property) (Fuller 2004: 20). Men are the head of the family, and in the fathers absence, the oldest son has responsibility over the household. The following verse, which still has meaning today, can be read in the 2000 year old Hindu text called Laws of Manu from the Dharmasutras (Fuller 2004: 20):

\[
\text{In childhood subject to her father,} \\
\text{in youth to her husband,} \\
\text{and when her husband is dead to her sons,} \\
\text{she should never enjoy independence.}
\]

According to C.J Fuller women are not uniformly inferior and subordinated. It can happen that
especially older women have great power and influence not only in the home, where the women do most of the work, but also when it comes to important decisions in the family, like children’s marriage, selling property or organising the work on the family farm (Fuller 2004: 21).

1.3.2 NGO project for adolescent girls

Centre for Improved Rural Health and Environmental Protection (CIRHEP) has worked with sustainable rural development for over 20 years in Dindigul district, Tamil Nadu. The oppression of women has lead to an initiative to form groups for adolescent girls. Teenage girls have very little power over their own lives and are discriminated against in favour of boys. The groups, that started running 2010, are open for girls between the age of 11-20 years, and cover issues like gender equality, nutrition, reproductive health and sexual harassment. Up to 2012, 15 different groups were formed with a total of 150 participants. The girls are encouraged to continue to higher education and to put pressure on their families to allow them to continue studying and not marry them of during their teens. Much focus has been on puberty matters and especially menstruation. The girls have been given education about the menstrual cycle and other issues have been discussed like menstrual pain and vaginal discharge. The girls have also been shown how to sew their own cloth sanitary pads and are given material for a start up set.
Explaining the menstrual cycle in the adolescent group, CIRHEP

Talking about puberty and what happens in the body
2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Defining ritual

A central part of this thesis concerns ritual practice and the meaning of the ritual. The two terms *ritual* and *rite* are often used synonymously. Sometimes rite is seen as the concrete act and ritual used when talking about the act theoretically. I will not make a clear distinction between the two terms, because all researcher are not consistent in the usage. For a definition and an understanding of the term *ritual*, with its wide range of meanings and definitions, I have used the theories of Roy Rappaport (1999), Catherine Bell (1992) and Victor Turner (1967, 1974). Rappaport describe *ritual* as a term to denote "the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers" (Rappaport 1999: 24). That a ritual is not encoded by the performers implies that the acts or utterances of the ritual ha been specified and established by others and not by the performers themselves. Of course this does not mean that new rituals do not appear over time. Rappaport explains this contradiction by pointing out that new rituals are always created by elements from existing ones. Parts of older rituals are rearranged, some elements are excluded and new ones added (Rappaport 1999: 32). The *more or less* in front of the word *invariant* is essential for the definition. There is no ritual that is completely invariant from time to time or from different groups of performers. To have variations within the same ritual is unavoidable. Rappaport also says that a ritual is never an alternative way to say something, that could be done in a different way. The ritual form always adds something to the act, something that can not be expressed by just the content or message of the performance itself (Rappaport 1999: 31). The ritual act is more than just an individual performing something. Rituals communicates on a higher level and binds people in a society together, while connecting the present with previous generations. Rappaport calls it *the social act basic to humanity* (Rappaport 1999: 31). Essential for the ritual is the performance. An act needs to be performed to be a ritual. Here Rappaport makes a distinction between drama and ritual by saying that were a theatre is performed to give a message or say something a ritual is never performed just to communicate something but it also changes something or affects things or people.

Some researchers, like Victor Turner (1967), focus on the symbols and the meaning of the rites in their ritual studies. Turner argues that rituals recreate the social structures within communities. He calls the ritual performance a “social drama” (Turner 1967: 20). He identifies three different phases

14
in rituals. They start with a breach of the regular social relations, and this leads to the second phase when a crises appears because of the breach. To stop the breach, a number of actions start, with what Turner calls redressive action. In the final phase the group unites again. This kind of interpretations, which puts the meaning of the ritual in focus, has been criticized by Fritz Staal among others. Staal instead supposes that rituals are activities governed by rules, and that people are more interested in following the rules correctly than in analysing the meaning of the act or the thought behind it. According to Staal, discovering what kind of rules that is connected to a ritual, is what is most interesting (Staal 1986: 59).

In her work Ritual theory, Ritual practice Catherine Bell (1992: 90) defines three central terms to define ritual; formality, fixity and repetition. She also adds that a ritual can never only be a matter of routine or habit. It is never just a “dead weight of tradition”. Turner also comments this and mean that even if the ritual is fragmentary for some individuals in a group, that does not mean that the whole meaning and structure exist if looked to the mind of the whole group (Turner 1974: 36). Bell illustrates how the understanding of rituals is connected to the context, because all human activity is situational. To understand a certain ritual we need to look at the context it exists in. If an activity is abstracted from its immediate context in which it occurs, it is not quite the same activity anymore (Bell 1992: 81). Bell also highlights a phenomenon called ritualisation, which refers to the process when a regular activity is taken out from its everyday context and made into a ritual by pointing out its special value and making a distinction between it and other kinds of activities (Bell 1992: 88). According to Bell, all this makes it hard to form a general theory about what kind of activities that are rituals and which are not, as well as to find a universal meaning to ritual (Bell 1992: 90).

2.2 Rites of passage

The ritual practice examined in this study is the puberty rituals that girls in Tamil Nadu go through when they get their first menstruation. Puberty rituals classify as the type of rituals called rites of passage, also known as transition rites or initiation rites. These rites perform and mark a change of state or social position for a person, for instance childbirth, puberty, marriage and death (Turner 1974: 231). A now classical model for analysing rites of passage was constructed in 1909 by Arnold van Gennep. Van Gennep divides the process of a passing ritual into three phases.

I propose to call the rites of separation from a previous world, preliminal rites, those executed during the transitional stage liminal (or threshold) rites and the ceremonies of incorporation into the new world postliminal rites (van Gennep 1909: 21)
In the first phase the subject of passage is separated from its regular context. In the liminal phase the passing is performed, and in the last phase the initiand enters into the new context. Jørgen Podemann Sørensen find that by using this model and by looking at terms of separation, liminality and return in a ritual we can expose the dynamic that recreates the passenger. Through this, he says, it can be easier to see the expressions and beliefs that are special for the culture where the ritual is performed. But he also points out that this is just a model and it is not applicable in all cases (Podemann 1996: 31). Victor Turner (1967) has further developed van Gennep’s model. He has especially worked on theories regarding the liminal phase. In this phase ordinary structures disappears and the passengers are in a mystical and ambiguous state where they are no longer classified. They are in between. Turner holds that the “initiand is structurally if not physically invisible in terms of his culture’s standard definitions and classifications” (Turner 1974: 232). It is common that the initiands are seen as polluting in the ritual way Douglas describes (see 2.4). Since they are symbolically invisible and ritually polluting they are very commonly put in seclusion. The indigenous term for the liminal period is often the noun meaning “seclusion site” and the initiand is sometimes said to “be in another place”. If they are not removed to another place they are usually disguised in masks or costumes (Turner 1967: 95-96)

For a definition of the acts following a girls first menstruation I use Judith K. Brown’s (1963) article “A cross-cultural study on female initiation rites”. Brown defines a female initiation rite as an act that:

(...) consists of one or more prescribed ceremonial events, mandatory for all girls of a given society, and celebrated between their eight, and twentieth years. The rite may be a cultural elaboration of menarche, but it should not include betrothal or marriage customs.”
(Brown 1966: 838)

In the definition, Brown excludes rites that are celebrated for both boys and girls or are only celebrated for some girls in the society, as well as rites that are not mandatory. For actions connected to menarche¹ to be called an initiation rite there need to be certain rituals that are different from customs that are followed for every menstruation (Brown 1966: 838).

¹ The time when a woman gets her first menstruation
2.3 The anthropology of menstruation

It is relevant for my study to look at the different theories and views on menstruation symbolism and taboos that has existed, especially in the anthropological field. In *Blood Magic, The anthropology of Menstruation*, anthropology Professors Tomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb give a critical appraisal of the different theories that has been around over time on menstrual taboos. Their appraisal has been the base for my analyse of menstrual notions and taboos in the study area. The topic of menstruation has for long been highlighted in anthropological studies. Menstrual taboos have generally been seen as a sign of primitive irrationality, as well as the dominance of men over women (Buckley & Gottlieb 1988: 3). Menstrual taboos are described by Buckley and Gottlieb as a “supernaturally sanctioned law”. Menstrual taboo is different from menstrual rule, which is described in the way that “a taboo must have some kind of spiritual or mystical function, apart from any practical effect that might be their by-product” (Buckley & Gottlieb 1988: 24). The most common taboos are those that prohibit menstrual sex, cooking during menstruation and those that require that women are isolated (1988: 11).

A menstrual taboo is a phenomenon that has been widespread around the world and occurs in many different cultures. This fact, together with the cross-cultural similarities, has created a search for a universal origin to this kind of notions, though little has been established. Buckley and Gottlieb do also emphasize that the symbolism and cultural practice is very variable, both within the same cultures and cross culturally and (Buckley & Gottlieb 1988: 8). The common assumption that taboos only serve to oppress women or to protect men from the evil powers of menstruation, is problematic, according to Buckley and Gottlieb. This explanation is too narrow and they suggest that the taboos rather should be seen as part of “religious systems that may have wide cosmological ramifications” (1988: 9-11). In some cultures the taboos connected to menstruation serve to protect the woman, who is seen to be in a creative spiritual state, from the influence of other people that are in a more neutral state. Buckley and Gottlieb also explain that in some cultures “menstrual customs, rather than subordinating women to men fearful of them, provide women with means of ensuring their own autonomy influence, and social control” (Buckley & Gottlieb 1988: 7). Many of the menstrual customs can also be seen to lead to the fact that women get access to a gender-exclusive ritual power (Buckley & Gottlieb 1988: 14).

There are two varieties of menstrual taboos, those that restrict the behaviour of menstruating women and those that restrict the behaviour of other people in relation to the women. For an analyse of menstrual taboos it is important to first distinguish which one of the varieties you are handling.
with. As an example Buckley and Gottlieb give the menarche rituals among Buddhist and Catholics in Sri Lanka. On the surface the rituals between the two groups look similar. Among the buddhists they are performed because women are seen as a threat to the cosmic purity. The catholics on the other hand perform their rites because they think that women are vulnerable to threats posted by the cosmos. For the two groups the ritual means quite different things and also reflects the different construction of womanhood and the social status for the Buddhist and the Catholic women in Sri Lanka (Buckley & Gottlieb 1988: 10). The same can be asked about the seclusion in “menstrual huts” that has been common for women in many cultures. Does the prohibited contact with others serve to benefit the women or to protect the men from the menstruating women? (Buckley & Gottlieb 1988: 12).

Menstrual taboos have sometimes been explained to come from the thought of menotoxins, i.e. that there are dangerous bacterias in the menstrual blood. The fact that not all cultures have seen menstrual blood as toxic, but instead have used it for medical purposes, oppose this theory. In addition, there has been no scientific proof found for the hypotheses of menotoxity itself and the thoughts probably origin from notions of spiritual contamination (Buckley & Gottlieb 1988: 19-21). Menstrual taboos are often connected to the concept of pollution. However, it is largely men who have defined menstruation as polluting, and studies usually do not tell us what the women think about this issue.

Buckley and Gottlieb do not argue against all the current explanations of menstrual taboos. They just set out that the model to see all menstrual taboos as female oppression is not adequate. The social functions of the taboos are culturally variable and can not be lumped together. They need to be analysed within the context which they occur (Buckley & Gottlieb 1988: 14).

2.4 Impurity and Pollution

To be able to understand the notions about menstruation in the hindu tradition it is essential to give some focus to the widespread ideas about impurity, purification, pollution and contagion. Mary Douglas (1984) examines in her work *Purity and Danger*, first published in 1966, thoughts on these ideas. Central is the notions about contamination or pollution that exists in what she choose to call primitive societies. She means that it is important to understand that what is seen as unclean differs from culture to culture, and in this case it also has a symbolic and religious meaning that is an unfamiliar thought in our kind of society. Pollutants can be seen as “dirt”, and what we see as
dirt, Douglas explains, is something that is “out of place”. She gives the example with shoes. They are usually not seen as unclean, but if we put them on the table they are all the sudden considered dirty. The same with food. The food is not dirty in itself, until we leave it in the bedroom (Douglas 1984: 41). To control contamination is a form of controlling social order and to organize the world. 

As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder. If we shun dirt, it is not because of craven fear, still less dread of holy terror. (...) Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment. (Douglas 1984: 2)

Here Douglas shows that the view of what is dirt is culturally constructed and not fixed by nature and that the need to avoid it does not mean that we are afraid of the dirt or deceases it could cause. It just means that we want to keep the system in order.

Douglas says that she is not “suggesting that the primitive cultures in which these ideas of contagion flourish are rigid, hide-bound and stagnant” (Douglas 1984: 5). The traditions naturally change a bit over time. It is important to remember though that for the people practicing the ideas they seem timeless and unchanging (Douglas 1984: 5). In traditions with strong ideas about contagion and purification it is also very hard for individuals to change their notions about these issues or, like Douglas puts it, “to shake his own thought free of the protected habit-grooves of his culture (Douglas 1984: 6).

Douglas set out that in many cultures it is hard to make a clear distinction between holiness and impurity. An example of this could be for example that the prohibition of eating a certain thing could come both from a thought that it is sacred or that it is impure. This is not the case in hinduism where there is a very clear distinction between holiness and uncleanness. This does not mean that the two matters are always absolute opposites. What is clean and what is unclean can vary according to the context, but the symbolic system is very precise about what is what and there is never any doubt about it (Douglas 1984: 8-9). Ritual purity is very essential in the hindu practice. Body fluids, such as blood or pus from a wound are considered polluting, as well as childbirth and death. The cast system is also strongly connected to ideas about purity and pollution. That is the reason why the lowest cast, the Dalits, are considered untouchables. People from a lower cast are seen to pollute members of a higher cast through physical contact and by touching of things. Especially for the priestly cast of the Brahmins, the purifying bath is essential. For a brahmin to be able to perform puja, worshipping the gods, he needs to first be cleansed from impurity by a bath (Douglas 1984: 41-43).
3. Previous research

There have been a few Indian studies done on this subject, mostly focusing on the health aspects of menstruation. I will here present some of the results and conclusions from three studies, conducted 2001 and 2005, which are concerning both the medical issues and the socio-cultural aspects. In the analyse of my empirical material I will use these studies both to compare with and to strengthen my conclusions. I will also use a Swedish master thesis carried out 2009 in the city of Banaras (also called Varanasi) by Anna Kilhgren Älmquist about women’s experience and behaviour regarding the restrictions and taboos following menstruation.

3.1 Socio-economical aspects of menstruation in an urban slum

Garg, Sharma & Sahay’s (2001) observations among women in a slum area in Delhi showed that menstruation was seen as dirty blood that needed to be expelled from the body. The notions that women are unclean during menstruation is manifest in the need for segregation and the taboos that forbid women to perform different domestic tasks and ritual activities (22). It was also found that menstruation was a subject that was rarely discussed either in public or within the families, leaving girls unprepared for menarche, and with very little knowledge about what happened in their bodies.

Being segregated and told they are “impure” and must avoid certain behaviors, restricted in their interaction with men, not allowed to visit holy places and having to cover themselves fully, all make young adolescent girls feel inferior. Their first menstrual period often evokes negative feelings towards their bodies and bitterness about having to endure not only menstruation but the changes it makes in their lives. (Garg 2001:22)

When menarche was discussed it was usually not put in relation to fertility because of the fear that young women will become conscious of their sexuality. Garg et al. mean that the silence about puberty puzzles the girls and they find that mothers are critically important in the role to give emotional support and assurance that menstruation is normal and healthy. However, mothers usually do not bring up the subject with their daughters and they themselves often lack knowledge about the physiology of menstruation (Garg 2001:22). The little information that was given to girls at their first period was given only once, and was often provided by a friend or a sister-in-law. The girls were told that periods come every month and that they should use a cloth for absorbing the blood, but many were not even told how often they should change the cloth (Garg 2001:20).
Most women preferred to use cloth from old, ragged or rejected clothes, as this was the cheapest material, but they sometimes needed to spend money on buying new cloth for the purpose. Of the 380 women in their study, 92 percent said that they only used the cloth once and did not wash and reuse it. Two of the women explained that they buried their menstrual cloth to prevent witchcraft that could lead to infertility. The observations revealed that even if the women were taught to use clean cloth and were aware of the consequences, the old clothes were often kept in a dirty bundle (Garg 2011:21). One of the conclusions the authors draw from the study is that “there is a clear need to provide information to young girls in ways that are acceptable to their parents, schools and the larger community, and at the same time, allow young women to raise their own concerns” (Garg 2001:23).

3.2 Menstrual practices among adolescent girls in Rajasthan

Another study is carried out in Rajasthan, in the north of India, by Khanna et. al (2005). The study concerns awareness regarding menstruation, traditional believes and reproductive problems among 730 adolescent girls in both urban and rural areas. 92 % of the informants were not aware about the natural phenomenon of menstruation and 70 % believed that menstruation is not even a natural process in the body. The source of information was in most cases the mother, followed by sisters or friends. Teachers had “an almost negligible role” when it came to providing information about menstruation. Also here the girls had several restrictions during their periods, like not entering or touch anything in the kitchen. Especially in rural areas the girls where not allowed to pass through crossroads since it is believed that during menstruation there is a bigger risk to be caught by evil spirits (Khanna 2005:96-97). The study also indicated that most of the information the girls received about menstruation was in the form of restrictions concerning their behavior (Khanna 2005:91). Khanna et al. (2005) also asked what kind of material the girls used during their periods and found that 75 percent used old cloth. It was found common for the girls to reuse the cloths for several periods. The cloths were usually washed with soap, but then unfortunately often stored in unhygienic places, not to risk others to see it (99). Khanna et al. (2005) claim that their study indicates that there is a strong relationship between unhygienic menstruation practice and reported symptoms of reproductive tract infections (RTIs)². They found that the prevalence of RTIs was more than three times higher among girls having unsafe menstrual practices (Khanna 2005: 106). In

---

² Reproductive Tract infections
total 70 % reported that they had problems during their menstruation. A major problem was abdominal pain, which was reported by 80 %. 53 % reported “irregular periods” as a problem (Khanna et al 2005: 99).

Part of the study was to identify different background characteristics among the groups of girls that participated. It revealed that schooling, residential status, occupation of father, caste and exposure to media were the most important factors for safe menstruation practice. From this the authors draw the conclusion that more information is the way to change the negative health situation.

Girls living in urban areas, attending schools and having access to media are better informed about reproductive health issues. A significant association of these factors with safe menstrual practices offers an opportunity that increased knowledge may escalate safe practices. (Khanna 2005:105)

Khanna means that the girls that have most access to information also have the best knowledge about reproductive health and that knowledge leads to safer menstrual practice. It is therefore important to increase the knowledge for all different groups of girls in the society.

### 3.3 Menstrual traditions, health and knowledge among adolescent girls in South India

The study performed by Naryan et. al (2001) on adolescent girls is very similar to my study. The study areas are in the same part of India, and it discusses the same subjects, the customs following menarche, the traditional restrictions and taboos connected to menstruation, health aspects and the knowledge among teenage girls. The study was carried out in the town of Pondicherry, located in the north of Tamil Nadu, and in a nearby rural area. Since the result from the rural area is more relevant for my thesis I will mostly focus on that part of the study in this review.

The report of the study starts with a statement on why it is essential to focus on adolescent girls. Up to recently most programmes and research on women’s reproductive health have been focused on married women. Though the positive aspects of giving attention to health issues and nutrition are of great value during the adolescent years, this has not been prioritized. Like Naryan et. al (2001) says “looking after health and nutrition help build up a buffer against the heavy physical demands of the reproductive years” (226). They also state that “patterns of menstrual hygiene that are developed in adolescence are likely to persist into adult life” (Naryan 2001:236)
Despite all the focus that is given to the ceremonies following menarche and all restrictions and symbolism connected to menstruation girls usually have very little knowledge of it, which is shown in the study:

One would expect that somehow, during the early phases of this elaborate enactment, useful information about menses, reproduction and hygiene could be imparted. But from this study, it appears that adolescent girls were not prepared in any way for their first menstruation. (Naryan 2001:230)

Two thirds of the girls in the study described the experience of menarche as shocking and fearful. Many said they were crying and that it came as a surprise to them. The fact that the first bleeding often come as a surprise and is something that frightens the girls is also found in the two other studies (Garg 2001:19, Khanna 2005:96). Naryan et al explain that there is a “rule” that says that the mother of the menarche girl should not be the one who see and “verify” the first bleeding, and that this could be a reason for why the mothers do not either talk about menstruation with their daughters (Naryan et al 2001:235). Like the study of Khanna et al, the girls in the Naryan study also said that most of the information they gained during the rituals was about the restrictions and how to behave (Naryan 2001:231).

The taboos are connected to the concept of pollution and they prohibit certain acts both to protect others from harm, as well as to protect the girl herself (Naryan 2001:231). In the report two different types of restriction is mentioned. The types that where most followed by the girls are the ones regarding religious places, i.e restrictions that are very common and deeply ingrained in Hindu practice. Other restrictions were connected to more trivial beliefs, or like the authors put it, seemingly “irrelevant”. Some of these restrictions were common among the informants, such as not sitting in the threshold or letting dogs eat your leftovers (Naryan 2001: 231).

The part of the study regarding knowledge of anatomy revealed that many of the adolescent girls were lacking basic knowledge about the reproductive organs and could not point them out on a body map. Only one third could identify the uterus, and many did not know were the menstrual blood came from. 28 percent identified the urinary bladder as the source of the blood (Naryan 200: 231).

Part of the research was in the form of a questionnaire study were 292 adolescent girls were asked questions concerning their hygiene practice and health problems. A majority of both the rural and urban girls reported that they used old cloth for their periods, 83 and 72 percent respectively (Naryan 2001:233). In Table 1 all the numbers from the rural area are presented.
Table 1. Type of pad used (Naryan 2001: 233)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of pad used</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Only undergarments</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old cloth</td>
<td>82.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old cloth and napkins</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disposable napkins</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If cloth was used it was usually reused and washed at least some times.

The most common health problem among the girls was dysmenorrhea. 87 % reported some kind of pain or discomfort during menstruation. Many girls reported vaginal discharge as a problematic illness. Naryan et al. say that it is clear that some of the reported white discharge is caused by RTIs, but also that there is no proof of a strong connection between the presence of RTIs and women’s reports of white discharge. Some of the reported problems could be just excessive worry about “normal” vaginal secretions.

The findings of this study reinforce that this reticence about giving information to adolescent girls is indeed widespread. The attention paid to a girl’s first menstruation would appear to provide an opportunity for imparting health education, including genital hygiene.

(Khanna 2005:104)

The visible, expressive public celebration of girls’ coming of age in Tamil Nadu would seem to offer a vehicle for broadened transmission of information about reproductive health issues, including specific information about menstrual hygiene. (Naryan 2001:237)

Naryan et al also says that it seems like families increasingly assume that the school system will take care of these issues. In addition to school curriculums, Naryan et al also mention community groups and peer groups as channels where the information could be transmitted (2001:237).

3.4 Hindu women’s thoughts on menstrual restrictions

The thesis “Religious discourse of Menstruation in the Hindu tradition” by Anna Kihlgren Älmquist discusses what kind of notions hindu women have regarding menstrual taboos and how they relate to the restrictions in speech and practice. Kihlgren also examines if the women feel positively or negatively discriminated by the religious discourse of menstruation and the restrictions that comes of it (Kihlgren 2009: 8). The study mainly consisted of interviews with eight hindu women from the city of Banaras, in the age between 26 and 43 years. The result showed that the women saw themselves as unclean and polluting during their menstruations, both in a physical and spiritual way.

3 Napkins is the used term for pads in India. I will mostly use the term pads except when it is in a quotation or a table.
All agreed that it required a bath to make them pure again after menstruation. They were all affected in their daily lives because of this impure state. They were following the restrictions to not look at pictures of gods or goddesses, perform *puja* (worship) or enter a temple. It was seen that women should avoid physical contact with other people to keep from polluting them (Kihlgren 2009: 34-35). Some restrictions, such as to not cook during menstruation and sleep in a separate place, was not followed by the majority of the women. The change of family constellations, and other practical reasons, has lead to that many of the old restrictions are not followed by the women today.

Some of the women saw the restrictions as a break from normal housework. For some the restrictions where connected with feelings of loneliness and shame. The restrictions could be motivated both as a protection for the sensitive woman and as a precaution to not harm others (Kihlgren 2009: 39-40).

Kihlgrens study reveals that the women have very clear notions about the rules of menstruation and that the practiced custom correlates perfectly to old sanskrit text, even though none of the women have any special religious training. Kihlgren explains this by connecting the menstrual practise with the overall hindu notion of dirt. The way you handle menstruation is not any different from how you handle other types of dirt (Kihlgren 2009: 47). The study shows that the notions of menstruation and the rules about uncleanness are deeply rooted in the hindu mind, even though the everyday practice changes over time.
4. Methodology

4.1 Qualitative method

The main method used in this thesis is a qualitative method consisting of focus group interviews. Central for the qualitative method is to look at the empirical data as open and ambiguous. It is also important that the researcher take the perspective of the subject that is studied and not presuppose from his/hers own ideas (Alvesson & Sköldberg 1998: 17).

I have also used a quantitative method in form of a small questionnaire study as a complement to the results from the focus groups. Alvesson and Sköldberg find that even if the main method is qualitative, it can be fruitful to work with some quantitative material as well to make some statistics as background material for the qualitative research (Alvesson & Sköldberg 1998: 19). Qualitative interviews suited my type of research since it is a method that is flexible and gives the best opportunity for detailed answers and the possibility to follow up the answers (Bryman 2008: 413). Observations were also used as an addition to the research method. At one occasion I made observations from a ceremony in one of the villages which are used as empirical material. My time at CIRHEP and involvement in the adolescent groups can also be seen as a form of observations, as well as my visits to other NGOs.

Using a qualitative method with a limited number of informants and a narrow geographical research area, this study does not aim at reaching conclusions that applies for all Indian or even Tamil adolescent girls. It rather aims to give an understanding and insight on the lives of some rural Tamil girls, even though part of the results can be assumed to be similar for Indian girls in general.

4.2 Informants

The main informants of this study are 25 girls and young women between the age of 12 and 25 years, with a majority around 15 years (see table 2). Only girls that have already had their first menstruation were chosen as informants. They were divided in five different focus groups. Four of the groups consisted of schoolgirls, and all of them had participated in the adolescent groups except one. The fifth group was four university students. They were chosen as informants with a thought that they, with their higher age, would be able to express ideas and feelings in a more complex way.
than the schoolgirls. The students are all studying management and rural development at a university also located in Dindigul district. I came in contact with them through one of their classmates, an exchange student who is also involved in CIRHEP projects. In one of the groups with schoolgirls a 21 year old and a 25 year old woman participated as they were also members of the adolescent groups. The schoolgirls come from three different villages, each with a population between 1 000 to 3 000, which is very small communities in the Indian context. I will call the villages by the fictive names Anilpatti (A), Babupatti (B), Cuttipatti (C). From Cuttipatti there were two different focus groups.

Table 2 Focus groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of girls/age group</th>
<th>12 y</th>
<th>13 y</th>
<th>14 y</th>
<th>15 y</th>
<th>16 y</th>
<th>20 y</th>
<th>21 y</th>
<th>25 y</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anilpatti</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6 girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Babupatti</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5 girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuttipatti 1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5 girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuttipatti 2</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5 girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Univ. students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>4 girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>25 girls</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When I refer to the different groups I call them focus group A, B, C1 and C2. The university students are called Focus group U. I wanted a major part of the informants to already been part of “the menstruation meetings” and the training to make sanitary pads, because I wanted to see what impact the training had given. I also estimated that it would be much easier to get information about this subject from girls that was a bit more used to taking about this issues than the average Indian girl. It is important to remember that the fact that they have already been part of meetings about menstruation could affect how they answered the questions.

The majority of the girls parents are either small scale farmers, carpenters, shopkeepers or labor workers within construction or agriculture. When referring to the informants in the text I use fictive names.

As a complement to what the girls and young women reported I have also interviewed people related to the subject, such as my supervisor, a social worker, a gynaecologist, sociology students and a university professor. In Table 3 a list of all the informants from the complementary interviews is shown.
My supervisor in field, K.A Chandra is also the project leader of the adolescent groups, as well as the president of CIRHEP. Naturally, she possesses a lot of knowledge in this area and has contributed much to my understanding of the context. One official interview with her was held, but I have also used information that has come out of our frequent contact. In the text I will refer to her as project leader or just with her name.

My contacts with all the informants have initially been through CIRHEP or people I met that are also involved in CIRHEP’s work and these people have then given me ideas for other people to see.

In the questionnaire study 78 girls, at the age of 12 and 15 years, participated. The questionnaire was handed out to girls in three different villages, Anilpatti, Babupatti and a village I will call Darmapatti. I chose Darmapatti because the girls there have not had any menstruation education yet, and I wanted that group to compare with. In Anilpatti six girls from the “Adolescent group” answered the questions when they were gathered for a group meeting. In Babupatti, 32 girls, and in Darmapatti 40 girls, were approached during school time. They filled in the form sitting in the classroom.

### Table 3. Complementary interviews

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Geeta⁴, Social worker, Integrated Child Development Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Gynaecologist, Governmental Hospital Nilakottai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>K. A Chandra, project leader and supervisor in field, CIRHEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Dr. Lalitha, Department of Rural Development, Gandhigram University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Sociology students, 11 women 19-22 years, Kudumbam project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Danah and Neera,⁵ Koodu, feminist group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Project leader, Eco Femme</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

⁴ Fictive name  
⁵ Fictive names

### Table 4. Questionnaire study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Village</th>
<th>Number of Girls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anilpatti</td>
<td>6 girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Babupatti</td>
<td>32 girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darmapatti</td>
<td>40 girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td><strong>78 girls</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

28
4.3 Interpreter

Many of the interviews have been conducted with the help of an interpreter. The interviews with the adolescent girls have all been interpreted by a 16 year old girl from an English speaking school located in another part of Tamil Nadu. It was suitable that the interpreter for these interviews was the same age, or some years older, than most of the interviewed girls, because this made them more relaxed to talk freely. For this type of interviews I also think it was good that the interpreter were not from the same area as the informants, because the risk of her knowing somebody they knew or their relatives were minimal. The same interpreter also helped me with the interviews with a social worker and the college students. At a time when I visited another NGO to interview sociology students, a women working at that NGO interpreted for me.

During the fieldwork I observed that for the interviews to work it was essential that only me and the interpreter were present. In one of the villages two women, living in the same village and involved in the adolescent group project, were present during a focus group interview. The girls did not say much at all and they barely answered the questions. I had to end the interview and arranged for a second occasion, without the other two women, which went much better. Even when the interviews were arranged for only me and the interpreter to be present, it was sometimes difficult to prevent other people from listening. When sitting outside in the village, people sometimes came up to us, leaning over the shoulder to listen. The concept of privacy is not as strong in the Indian society as we are used to in the West, and I learned that it can sometimes be rude to ask people to leave.

There are many disadvantages to do interviews without knowing the language of the informants, and with the need to rely on an interpreter. You can never be quite sure that the interpreter gives you the full meaning of what is said, and maybe that is even sometimes an impossibility. With a translation it is always hard to get the exact same meaning or feeling as the original statement. Without being truly familiar with the culture it is also hard to understand the underlying context to what is told. The ideal for the type of interviews in this study would have been an open discussion within the focus group lead by the interviewer. This was not possible for my interviews since that is very hard to achieve with an interpreter. Taking into account that I did not have the possibility to use a certified interpreter that was suitable for this kind of interviews, the arrangement with the interpreter I used worked out very well.
4.4 Interviews

The focus group interviews were conducted between January 30 and February 19. In Anilpatti the interview was held outside the school building, in Babupatti in a place in the middle of the village where you could sit and in Cuttipatti inside a classroom. This is where the adolescent girl group meetings generally were held. I met two of the school girl focus groups at two different occasions and the other two groups only ones. The university students I only met with ones, and the interview took place at their university during a lunch break. Each interview session lasted for approximately one hour.

For the interviews fixed questions were prepared and an interview guide was used. The complete interview guide is found in Appendix 2. Many of the questions were open-ended and there were opportunities for follow up questions, clarifications and change of formulations during the interview, which gave the interview a semi-structured character. Due to the fact that the focus group interviews were conducted with an interpreter the conversation did not flow and grow into a discussion in the way that is ideal for this type of focus group interviews. The conversation was often more between the informants and the interpreter than between me and the informants, which made it harder for me to grasp all that was said. The girls that participated in the interviews are not at all used to this kind of situation where they are supposed to talk freely from their own point of view. This combined with the sensitive topic made it hard to create the open discussions that you could wish for. Despite of this, the girls did open up enough for me to get an understanding of their situation and an insight on how they feel and think about the different issues.

There are no recordings of the interviews. With interpreted interviews it can sometimes be unnecessary to work with recorded material. The first interview was recorded, but it did not add anything new, when going through it with the interpreter. Considering the sensitive topic and the integrity of the girls I decided to only take notes from the interviews.

4.5 Questionnaire

The questionnaire was answered by 78 girls. It was written in English and then translated to Tamil by a staff member of CIRHEP. The questionnaire consist of questions about how much information the girls had about menstruation before their first period, what they learned when it happened the first time, who it was that gave the information, what kind of traditional customs they are following, what type of material they are using for protection and how and if they want to have more
knowledge about menstruation. The complete questionnaire is seen in English in Appendix 2. Some of the questions are multiple-choice questions and for some the informants had to write their own answer.

4.6 Analysis of empirical material

When working with my material I have followed the reflective research method presented by Alvesson (2008: 19). That means that you never determine on one univocal interpretation. It has been essential for me to try to analyse the material outside my own cultural framework of thinking. That was indeed a big challenge. It is impossible to free yourself completely from the ideas you have been socialised into. I constantly needed to question how my own culture and way of viewing things effects my ability to understand things in this local context and I sometimes had to reconsider my initial interpretations. My analyse method connects to the hermeneutic interpretation method, where you put the meaning of a phenomenon in relation to the whole, and the context it exists in (Alvesson & Sjölund 1998: 193).

4.7 Ethical aspects

Ethical principals are important to consider for all research that aims to study human behaviour, and especially for this kind of study, where the research is placed in an unfamiliar environment for the researcher and with children as informants. I have followed the four principles for ethical research in social science defined by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet):

- Principle of Information: the respondents should be informed of the aim of the study
- Principle of Consent: the respondents should be informed that the study is voluntary
- Principle of Confidentiality: the informants should be anonymous and all the material handled with confidentiality
- Principle of the Use of data: the material should only be used for the study it is collected for

I explained the content of the four principles before I started the interviews and gave the informants the possibility to ask questions. The most critical principle is the second one about consent. The Indian society is strongly hierarchal and children’s opinions are usually not taken into account. As a
grown up, and a foreign guest, the girls see me as a clear authority who could be hard to say no to. It should also be considered that I am linked to the adolescent group project which the girls participate in. I therefore especially emphasised that the participation was completely voluntary and that they did not have to answer all the questions if they did not want to. I also made clear to the people from CIRHEP that helped me organise the focus groups that they should make clear that the girls joined by free will. Considering this, the use of focus groups is an advantage, since each girl is not exposed as much as in a single interview.
5. Coming of Age

-Empirical material and analysis

Menarche, the time when a girl first menstruates, is referred to in Tamil Nadu as “coming of age”. The girl is now matured and with that comes new rules about how to behave. Connected to menarche are also rituals that include days of seclusion and a special ceremony. With menstruation comes the need for sanitary protection and questions about bodily functions. In the following section I will present my empirical material as well as my analysis of the results. I have divided the material in different categories, each with two parts. First the empirical material is presented, followed by a section with the analysis and connection to the theory. For example, in the first category called 5.1, the first part with the empirical material will be 5.1.1 and the analysis for that category 5.1.2. The second category is divided in 5.2.1 and 5.2.2 and so on.

5.1.1 Lack of Information

The answers from the questionnaire show that many girls do not know what menstruation is before they have their first period. 38 % reported that they did know about menstruation before and 62 % said they did not know.

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>38 %  (30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>62%    (48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%   (78)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The focus group from the university said that girls do not know about what will happen when they begin to menstruate, because it is not discussed in the families.

Most girls don’t know about it because people don’t talk about it openly, the tradition is like that (Malathi, university student)

In Babupatti, all the girls in the focus group said they were afraid they would not be allowed to continue with school once they menstruated, and explained that this was how it was the reality for
the previous generation of women. The same girls said they were all told that menstruation happened because they had been eating a lot of sweets. This is an example how localised and isolated, some of the traditions or beliefs seemed to be. Here all five girls had been told about sweets as the reason for menstruation, but I never heard of this explanation at any of the other villages.

How much or how little knowledge the girls had before is a bit hard to grasp. Many did seem to know that something would happen but not exactly what it meant, like this girl’s answer in the questionnaire:

> I had heard friends and relatives talk with each other about it, but didn’t really know what it was (Questionnaire, Darmapatti)

Overall, the occasion when a girl notices her first bleeding, seems to be connected to negative feelings. Some girls said in the interviews that they did not know who to talk to, but eventually turned to either a friend or their mothers.

In the questionnaire, the girls that said yes about knowing about menstruation before their own first period, were asked what they did know. A majority of the answers had to do with the different restrictions that a woman needs to follow when she menstruates, or what she should do to protect herself from evil spirits (more about this in section 5.5).

> My sister told me that when I menstruate I need to keep a piece of iron and lemon, I shouldn’t go to the temple and I shouldn’t hand over things to people. (Questionnaire, Babupatti)

This was very similar to what the girls were told at the time they had their first period and somebody, often the mother or a friend, spoke to them about the situation. The information always seemed to be very sparse and vague. Some of the answers in the questionnaire simply said:

> My friend said “now you are matured, so take care of yourself (Questionnaire, Babupatti)

> My relatives told me that I had matured. (Questionnaire, Darmapatti)

> I was told to be clean, and I was asked to sit in a corner (Questionnaire, Darmapatti)

None of the girls in the focus groups could give an explanation to why you have menstruation or how it works in the body. The university students knew that it had something to do with the egg, but they did not seem certain and could not give a more specific explanation. They said that it is
because they do not have anybody to ask about it.

_This is something we cannot talk about with our mothers._
_You cannot ask about why you have menstruations_ (Priya, university student)

In Anilpatti they said that whatever they know about menstruation they learned from CIRHEP. But when asked about why the menstruation comes, they explained it by saying that the egg is growing in the uterus for 14 days and then bursts and comes out as menstruation. One girl referred to it as “bad blood, that needed to come out” (Focus group A).

I asked all the focus groups with the teenage girls what they had learned from the adolescent groups that had been valuable. In Anilpatti they mentioned they learned about different “symptoms”, like stomach pain, why stomach pain occurs and what you can do about it. This was also something they said they could easily spread and share with others, like classmates and a few even with their mothers (Focus group A). Learning about stomach pain was also mentioned in the other groups. Overall, menstrual pain has been a recurrent subject of discussion in all groups of Tamil girls and women with whom I have talked about menstruation. In Cuttipatti I heard from one of the girls that she had learned from the adolescent meetings that it is normal to have a headache and feel bad some days before the menstruation starts. Earlier she did not understand the connection. Another topic that they specifically remembered from the group meetings was the importance of nutritious food.

_Many girls do not eat at all during menstruation, they do not feel like it, but that is not good. You loose a lot of blood, so you need nutritious food_ (Thara, Cuttipatti)

One girl from Cuttipatti reported that she had learned that you can exercise to reduce the stomach pain. When asked if they talk more about menstruation now after being in the adolescent groups one girl said that there had been a change but she did not know exactly what.

_I feel that something has changed, but I can`t really put the finger on what, but I want to know more now_ (Lalitha, Cuttipatti)

When I asked her what she wanted to know more about she said that she would like to know more about stomach pain. Why some have a lot of it and some not at all.

One girl in this group had not participated at all in the adolescent groups and it was obvious that she did not feel as comfortable talking about the subject as the others. She also said that she does
not want to learn more about menstruation. This difference between girls that have been in the adolescent groups and the ones that have not can also be found in the questionnaire study. The girls from Anilpatti and Babupatti that had been in the adolescent groups and the girls from Darmapatti that had not, answered the question about how interested they were to get more information a bit differently. The question was: Do you think you need more understanding and knowledge about menstruation? “You can see the result in Table 6.

Table 6. Do you want to know more about menstruation?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Adolescent group meetings Anilpatti and Babupatti</th>
<th>No adolescent group meetings Darmapatti</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>76 % (29)</td>
<td>35 % (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>24 % (9)</td>
<td>50 % (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>15 % (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total :</td>
<td>100 % (38)</td>
<td>100 % (40)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the girls that had been talking about menstruation in the adolescent meetings 76 % wanted to have more information, while among the girls from the village, where there had not been any “menstruation meetings”, only 35 % felt that need. A girl in Cuttipatti, which is the place where there has been the most “menstruation meetings”, said that:

*If there is something more about it that we haven’t learned, we would like to know about it* (Aadya, Cuttipatti)

A gynaecologist at the local hospital reported that one of the most common reasons adolescent girls seek help is because of irregular periods. It is very common that teenage girls do not get one menstrual period each month as older women do, and the menstruation almost never becomes regular until a few years after menarche. The doctor estimated that they have around three cases every week and that she just explains to the girls, and their often very anxious mothers, that this is totally normal and nothing is wrong with them. Other common problems among adolescent girls are anaemia and dysmenorrhoea, menstrual pain (Gynaecologist, Government Hospital Nilakottai). From university professor Dr Lalitha it was reported that it has become common among adolescent girls to take special pills (primolut-n) which postpone their menstruation when they want to be able to take part in a religious event or temple visit or for important exams. She said that this is not a good practice and added that doctors have warned that it can cause cancer in the reproductive
organs. The mothers spread the habit to the daughters, and they lack knowledge about the side effects (Dr. Lalitha)

5.1.2 To not know your body

Also the studies of Garg (2001:19) and Khanna (2005:103) support the observation that girls in India are not commonly prepared for menarche. Though this seems to be a widespread phenomenon in India, my results indicate that this has started to change. 38% of the respondents in my study said they had some knowledge before, which is a high number compared to Khanna’s 10% (2005:103). One reason for this could be the increased availability and usage of disposable sanitary pads in the previous years. This makes the phenomena of menstruation more visible, especially since the pads are now marketed with TV commercials.

Khanna (2005:103) noticed that the general opinion among their informants was that if they would have some more knowledge before menarche happened, the experience would not seem to be as painful or disturbing. It is reported in Garg (2001) and Khanna (2005) that girls often feel scared and think they are sick when they see the blood, however this was not anything the girls expressed in my focus group interviews. Many of the girls did say they felt scared in some way, and mentioned worrying about stomach aches and that they would not have the same freedom as before (Focus group B). An opportunity to express these worries would probably make the process much easier for the girls. It seems like this is not something that older girls or women in the families talk at all about with the younger ones. A lot of problems, for instance knowing whom to turn to when the bleeding is first noticed, would probably be avoided if mothers or other family members started to talk more openly about it. In the adolescent groups the girls were encouraged to discuss the topic of menstruation more with their families and friends. That would be a way to prepare younger girls for what to expect.

When the girls received information about menstruation it was almost solely about the restrictions and religious taboos a woman must follow, and not about the physiology or hygienic aspects, as also reported in Garg (2001) and Khanna (2005). A possible explanation for why menstruation is not explained properly, and even covered up with superstitions like the candy story, is that the parents, and the society, do not want the girls to be aware that after menarche they can become pregnant, and therefor more aware of their sexuality. This was also seen in the Garg study. Another explanation for why the mothers and other women in the families do not talk about menstruation in an educational
or supportive way is probably because they themselves lack the knowledge. They act like the older generation did when they were teenagers, and if they did not hear about it from their mothers or grandmothers they will not talk about it with their own children either. Here I think the adolescent groups can make an important contribution. Hopefully, the girls that participated will be prepared to spread the knowledge they gained to their future children and grandchildren.

Due to the explanation I heard about the egg that is growing and then bursts, it can be suspected that there are alternative explanations for menstruation around, that have reached the girls, or perhaps they just got it a bit mixed up. It should however be considered that these girls had for sure participated in the presentation about the menstrual cycle in the groups, and still they could not give a correct explanation. This means that it can be fruitful to talk about it more than once. This was also the impression I got when I talked to the adolescent girls I had met the year before in the adolescent groups. They still had the need to talk about for example stomach pain and have the opportunity to ask more questions.

The results from the question about if the girls wanted more information indicates that knowledge creates curiosity and a need for more knowledge, while not knowing much at all can make a person more ignorant to the issue. I believe that it could be that it is so uncommon to talk about these things that the girls that have not been in this meeting before, can not imagine what there is to know.

That many girls seek medical help for natural and unharmonious phenomenons like irregular periods and menstrual pain is a clear indication that more information is needed. It is my believe that a great deal of unnecessary worries among teenage girls could be reduced just by giving the girls more knowledge about how their bodies work. The reported common use of medicals to postpone the menstrual periods should also be seen as a warning bell.

5.2.1 Change of Social Status

The reason to why the girls say they are afraid they will not have the same freedom as before and the fact that many of the girls report that they are told to “be careful” or “take care of yourself” is related to the status change which happens when a girl “comes of age”. A girl that has menstruated, who has matured, should not have contact with boys. She needs to be more careful with her behaviour. She is not allowed to spend as much time outside the house as before, for example she can no longer play out in the streets. She should especially not stay out late in the night. The
Babupatti girls reported that in the past matured girls were not allowed out at all after six pm, but that this has changed now. However, today they still do not have the same freedom as they did before they began menstruating. One 50-year old Brahmin social worker, that works at the local social welfare department and also lives in one of the villages, explained that:

Some boys behave bad and try to seduce the girls and go away with them. If that happens the girl’s life is destroyed. (Geeta, Social worker)

In Anilpatti, when I asked about how the girls felt when they had their first period, they said that they were “not happy” and that they “did not want it to come that early”. When I asked more about why, they said it was because they knew they would not have the same freedom from now on. The girls also mentioned that they think a lot about why they need to follow these rules. They did not have any suggestions themselves when I asked what they thought was the reason. When I talked about these new rules for the girls with Geeta she said that it is done a bit differently in different families.

In some families they accept a more free behaviour and in some families they are more strict. Some just say “don’t talk to boys”. But some talk to the girls and explain about why they have to be careful. It also has to do with the education level of the parents. (Geeta, Social worker)

She says that in some of the most strict families the girls are barely aloud outside at all and are not allowed even to talk to male relatives anymore. Geeta explains that she thinks it is good that the girls are careful, but she thinks that this is to take it too far and believes that girls should be able to go outside and also to talk to male relatives. Asked about what she thinks about the fact that some girls have their periods as early as the age of eleven nowadays she said that she thinks that it is best that the girls have the restrictions as soon as they have their first menstruation even if it is that early.

5.2.2 Loss of Freedom

The custom that prescribes that the girls need to stay more inside and avoid contact with boys after menarche, seems to be mostly duet to parents desire for their daughters to be protected from boys that could take advantage of them. Families worry that contact with boys could eventually lead to the girl running away with a boy, and getting pregnant or married, and this is another in factor for
keeping girls in the house. For a girl, that would ruin her future and the family’s reputation. The boy on the other hand would not be as affected by the scandal. The results from the focus groups show that the change in social status affects girls’ everyday life to a great extend. The change seemed to happen as soon as the girl has her first menstruation, which explains why some girls spoke negatively about the occasion. They see it as the loss of their freedom. The girl now enters a new phase in her life, the time from when she is no longer a child, to the time when she will be somebody’s wife. This phase has during the last decades become longer and longer. Girls nowadays get their menstruation much earlier than before, and girls get married much later in life. Today the age of 20 is seen as an appropriate age to be married, when just some decades ago it was usually close to 15 years. Around the age of 15 was also common for a girl to get her first menstruation, some decades ago. Now menarche usually happens at the age of 12 or 13, sometimes as early as at 10 or 11 years. In the past this gap between childhood and married life was therefore shorter, and now it stretches over several years. I see that this can cause conflicts for the girls, who in many ways possess benefits like going to school, that women in the past did not have. Their situation clashes with the modern Indian ideal of active girls and educated women working in profession. I do not question the positive development that girls get married later. My guess is however that it is troubling for the girls to be in this “in-between phase” for so long, where they do not have full access to the society and need to avoid contact with men. One suggestion would be to put more responsibility and focus on the boys and their behaviour, and to try to reduce the problems instead of avoiding them by keeping the girls at home.

5.3.1 Seclusion

All of the adolescent girls in the study had been in seclusion in some way at the time of their first menstruation. The girls had all been sitting separately for some days in a corner of the house or outside the house. The place where the girls should sit and for how many days varied between the different villages. Three days was the minimum but it could be up to a month for some of the girls. Answers from the questionnaire reported 5 or 7 days. The five girls from Babupatti had all been told to sit still for 7 days on a sack that was put on the floor in a special place. They said that it was

---

6 A girl’s purity and virginity is important for the whole family’s reputation. The honour context is very precent in these societies, but will not be handled more in this limited research.

7 I do not have any statistical records of this. The numbers come from a general opinion from people I talked to, as well as from my questionnaire where the girls wrote the age for their first menstruation. The fact that menarche comes earlier and earlier for girls for every generation is however a well recognized process all over the world, mostly due to better nutrition.
uncomfortable to sit still in the same place for so long, especially since they were not allowed to use any sanitary pads or cloth for the flow. The tradition is to not use any protection for the very first period. I have not found any reason or explanations for this custom. They also said that the stomach pain made it an unpleasant time (Focus group B). The girls from Anilpatti said that they were told to sit in a corner of the house, and that the family brought them whatever they wanted to eat. Only one of the girls said that she had asked for something, cookies. The other ones said they did not feel like eating at that time. I asked how they felt when they were sitting in the corner. One of the girls said: “I felt that I was locked up in a prison”. This seemed to be something the rest of the girls recognized and another girl added “It was like sitting in a prison cell, because I was not allowed to move”. They all agree that it was not a pleasant time. They did not get any information about menstruation in connection with the time they were in seclusion, not even about the cloth or pads to be used for coming periods (Focus group A). The seclusion time for the girls in Cuttipatti was a bit different. All of the girls here, except one, from the two focus groups explained that they had to sit outside the house, under a cover that was leaned against the house wall, for five days. After five days they were allowed to move around again and go to school. It should be nine days actually, they told me, but since they had to go to school it has been compromised to five days now. For 25 more days, so totally 30 days, the girls were not allowed inside the house. During this whole month they slept outside, in front of the house. They had to eat on a separate plate, which the other family members would not use. The last girl, like the others, also needed to stay outside the house for 30 days, but instead of sitting in front of the house the first five days she had to sit in a place in the centre of the village where there is a little stage and where they build a kudisai, a form of hut. After five days they burned down the hut. I asked the girls how they felt about sitting outside:

I didn’t feel much at the time, because we had seen other girls do the same. But thinking about it now I feel bad. (Sandhya, Cuttipatti)

I felt bad because hygiene was the only reason for me to sit outside, because they said I was unclean. But I could have been sitting inside, because I wasn’t unclean. (Meena, Cuttipatti)

It felt bad, because I couldn’t move around. I missed watching TV. (Sati, Cuttipatti)

I asked the girls why they think it is done like this when a girl comes of age. The only answer I got was “it is the tradition”. Some of the girls just said that they do not know, but that they wonder about why you have to do it because they have not been given any explanation (Focus group C1).
5.3.2 Why sit in a corner?

The number of days a girl would sit in seclusion seems to have to do with what kind of cast the girl belongs to, and different casts often inhabits different villages. The number of days that was mentioned was always uneven numbers, with the exception for the longer periods of 30 days. Uneven numbers have traditionally been the symbolic meaning as powerful and magic in some ways. The lowest number that was reported from the questionnaire is three days, which seems to be the minimum. This also corresponds with Kihlgrens results from the study in Banaras where the women reported that they were most impure during the first three days of the menstrual period. It also indicates that the seclusion has to do with women being in an impure state.

That women sit isolated in menstruation huts during their periods has been the custom in many different cultures around the world, like mentioned by Buckley and Gottlieb. They emphasised that for an understanding it is important to distinguish if the isolation is to protect others, or to protect the women. This type of seclusion where the girl sits in a corner or outside in the kudisai only happens during the first menstruation and can therefore be seen as part of a larger passing rite, were also the Sadangu ceremony is included. The girl is isolated before she is initiated as a matured woman. I have no clear answer if this kind of isolation is mostly to protect anybody, the girl or others, from the critical state during menstruation. It could also just be a part of the initiation rite, which typically has elements of isolation of the initiand. However there are also ideas of seclusion for every menstruation in the hindu practice, like separate sleeping place and keeping away from others. That kind of seclusion, seem to be for protection of others and to prevent contamination from the woman to spread. I would guess that the same ideas are implemented also during this first seclusion. Seclusion from others during menstruation can leave the women and girls with feelings of loneliness, as reported by Kihlgren and this should also be considered when picturing the situation for the girls. The girls in my study all seemed to see very negative on the occasion and used strong expressions like “locked up in a prison”. They reported that they felt shy. Entering puberty is always a big change and menarche can be a shaking experience for a girl. Then add the exposure it means to sit still at a special place for some days, and it is not surprising that the girls felt shy and uncomfortable.

Turner talks about breaches in a group as the starting point for many kinds of rituals. That a daughter in the family gets into puberty, especially as it happens with the arrival of the polluting bleeding, can be seen as a clear breach or crises within the family, that then needs to adapt to the new situation. The girl is taken out of her normal context, just as Turner describes for the first phase
of initiation rites. Even if the ritual today is usually practiced with the girl inside the house, the girl is symbolically separated from the others in the family.

The fact that the girls report that they do not know why there is this tradition could be a cause to why they feel uncomfortable with it. They only mentioned that “this is the tradition”. Rappaport supposes that rituals usually bind a group together and connect them with there ancestors. The explanation in this case seemed to be that they do it as people always have done it, but I did not get the feeling that the girls felt a connection with earlier generations. Maybe because there did not seem to be any old stories or myths connected to the tradition, which otherwise can be something that remind us of a rituals origin or meaning. However there can of course be more to it than what the girls told in the interviews. There is always a risk that I did not ask the questions in the right way.

5.4.1 The Sadangu Ceremony

The ceremony that is held some time after a girl comes of age is called Sadangu. Not all the girls in the focus groups have had Sadangu. My understanding of it, after talking to the girls, is that the ideal is to have it some days after the first menstruation but it is not something that is compulsory for all girls in a family. Lack of money could be a reason for families to sometimes skip or postpone it, which was the case for some of the girls in my focus groups. It was not always clear if it had to do with money or if there could be other explanations. Several of the girls said that they did not know the reason why they did not have it. One explanation was that you sometimes only have it for the oldest daughter. It could however also be that it is hold only for one of the younger sisters, which was the case for one of the Cuttipatti girls (Focus group C 2). In some families the girls could decide if they wanted to have it or not. In other families, this was not an option (Focus group A). This shows that it is not something a girl absolutely needs to go through, not like the seclusion, but it is something almost all girls do at some point before they get married. In one of the focus groups a girl explained how it will work for one of the others that did not have it yet because of the cost. She said that they will probably have it for her one month before they will try to find a husband for her, to let people know about her and that they have a mature daughter in the house. Of the five girls in Cuttipatti nobody could first say why they had the Sadangu ceremony. Later in the same interview the 25 year old girl said that the reason for Sadangu is to let people know that the girl has

8 Three days seemed to be common for the interviewed girls. From K.A Chandra I learned that 16 days from menarche to the ceremony, has been the usual custom at least before. It seems to vary a lot between different communities.
come of age and can get married soon.

I was invited to take part of a Sadangu ceremony in Anilpatti. I will here give a short account of what took place during that evening. Exactly how the ceremony is performed will probably vary somewhat between different families, but I got the impression that this ceremony was representative for this area. The ceremony started in the evening around eight, when the uncle of the 13 year old girl, arrived with his family. It was already dark when they came walking down the dirt road through the village in a procession, the women carrying big trays with food and gifts on top of their heads. The girl sat in a corner behind the entrance door of the house. She had already been sitting there for some days, on a mat on the floor. The women in the uncles family took the girl and lead her out behind the house where they gave her a bath (or more correctly a bucket shower) and dressed her up. The women must be an uneven number, three, five or seven seemed to be usual. A paste of sandal wood was put on her cheeks and she was given a twig of neem leaves to hold. She was dressed in a new sari that the uncle had bought for her, together with new shoes, makeup and borrowed jewellery. The sandal paste is commonly used for religious events (K.A Chandra). It is a yellow thick paste which I have also seen spread on the doors of big cupboards, where it seems to serve the purpose as giving protection or luck.

While the women got the girl ready, the uncle and the other men were inside the house building a small hut, called *Kudisai*, with branches leaned against the wall at the place where the girl had been sitting. The tradition with a *Kudisai* probably comes from earlier traditions when the girls in seclusion were always sitting outside, away from the house, in a real hut. Now the custom has changed. Nowadays, most girls sit inside, but a symbolic hut is still included in the ritual. When the girl was ready she was lead back to the front of the house where all the guests, from her family and the village, had gathered. The girls was blessed by her uncle and then by some of the other guests, while kneeling down in front of them. The presents included food, like egg and fruit which is nutritious and believed to be strengthening for a young menstruating woman. She also got new clothes, among which the sari is the most important. Saris are only worn by adults and this shows that the girl is now mature.

In the focus group in Babupatti a girl explained some of their customs during the Sadangu ceremony:

*All aunts stood around me. They took a thread and measured my length and then cut the thread in two pieces. That they did three times. Then they put biscuits on top of my hands, on my shoulders and my head, and my uncle was the one that would take it off.*

(Kannama, Babupatti)

9 The leaves from the neem tree is widely used in India for medical and antibacterial purposes
They referred to that the adults just say that this is how it is, like this comment:

*My mother told me that he should be the one who brought it,*

*but I don’t know why* (Sandi, Cuttipatti)

I asked the girls in the focus groups what they thought about the ceremony and what they felt during it. All the girls in Anilpatti said that they did not like it. They used words like “scared” and “shy” to describe how they felt. They said there were a lot of people at their house and that they did not like to be in the centre of attention. Opposite to this all the girls in Babupatti said they liked the ceremony. They could not see anything bad about it and they thought it was nice that they had the opportunity to see their relatives.
Girl dressed up during her Sadangu ceremony

Egg, fruit, clothes and other gifts from the uncle
5.4.2 Passing into Marriageability

The definition by Brown of a female puberty rite includes that the procedure should be mandatory for all girls. The Sadangu ceremony, that is a clear case of a female puberty rite, is however not completely mandatory. If the families did not have enough money the ceremony could be postponed or skipped for some of the daughters. It could be that some ceremony must be held at some point before the girl gets married, but it does not have to be connected to the time of menarche. The seclusion on the other hand was followed in all families.

The connection between Sadangu and the girl as a bride is clear. Some decades ago, when girls were not out in the society, and going to school, the same way as today, it could be important to let other families know that the daughter had come of age. The girl is also dressed up, the same way a bride is dressed up for a wedding, with new clothes, flowers and lots of jewellery.

It is always the oldest brother of the mother that should bring a sari and build the kudisai. The reason for this can be found in the Tamil marriage tradition, where it is customary for a girl to marry her uncle on her mother’s side or his sons. This is still a common custom in the villages of my study area. For many families this is preferred while it strengthens the family. You then keep the money from the dowry within the family and you know the family you are leaving your daughter to. Among Tamils, blood bonds and the closeness between relatives are seen differently between the fathers side and the mothers side. On the mothers side a distinction is made between the mother’s brothers’ families and her sisters’ families. A girl can marry her mother’s brother or his sons, but not her mother’s sister’s sons or her father’s brothers, or his sons (Busby 1997: 35). Victor Turner states that in societies with patrilineal kinships, like in this case, the fathers side is seen as the “hard” legal line of descent and the mothers side as the “soft” affectional side. In those societies it is common that the uncle on the mother’s side is seen to have a mystical influence on a person’s welfare. It is possible that he can both curse and bless his sister’s children (Turner 1967: 235). I was also told that in this area the uncle (on the mother’s side) is very important for a girl before she gets married (K.A Chandra). With the connection to the uncle as a possible husband and the Sadangu ceremony being a time to expose a marriageable daughter, it is surprising that most of the girls in the interviews did not mention this when asked about the reason for Sadangu, or why it was the uncle that brought the gifts. They just said it was the tradition.

My feeling is that because the Sadangu ceremony is an established ritual it is somehow taken for granted in the villages and people do not think much about why they do it. This may explain why the girls could not give any reasons or explanations for why it is performed. This could also be the
explanation for the somehow strange fact that I did not hear almost anything about this ritual during the first five months I spent in this area, even though I worked with a project where puberty and menstruation was a central part.

It is also relevant to connect the ceremony with purifying acts, like the bath that is needed because the girl has become unclean from having her period, as well as protection against evil spirits with for example the neem twig. For understanding the meaning of the bath we can return to the theory of ritualisation, presented by Bell. An ordinary act with a practical function, like washing your self, becomes ritualised and given a symbolic meaning. The purifying bath can be found, like mentioned earlier in other parts of hinduism, as well as during women’s regular periods. It has then also a clear symbolic meaning, but it becomes more of an everyday habit during those times. The Sadangu bath is even more ritualised considering the situation and that the girl does not wash her self, but has a whole group of women handling it. More about taboos, purification and acts of protection will be discussed in the next section.

5.5.1 Restrictions and Evil Spirits

The different customs regarding menstruation seemed to vary between the different groups, but one custom seemed to be spread among all the girls I came in contact with. This was the habit to keep a piece of iron or/and a lemon during the periods. It was mentioned by a majority of the girls in the questionnaire study when asked about what traditional customs they were following, as well as by the girls in the focus groups.

We will take a piece of iron and keep it like a ring around our toes. I will also bring a lemon with me. If I just sit I can hold it in my hand. When we go to school we keep it in our bags. (Jothi, Babupatti)

I asked the girls in Cuttipatti why this was good and got the answer that otherwise you might see a ghost, and that the iron and lemon protects from evil spirits to enter your body, which can happen more easily while you are menstruating because you are in a vulnerable state. In the questionnaire study it was reported that women should cover their face when they go out during the menstruation time. This is also done to protect the women from harmful powers (K.A Chandra).

The restriction for menstruating women to go to the temple or any worshipping at all is one of the
strongest and most common menstrual taboos in hinduism, and the girls in my focus groups also mentioned this when I asked about what restrictions they followed. Some of the girls said that they felt bad not to be allowed in the temple. They are also not allowed to sit on chairs or at other family members beds and they should not visit other people’s homes (Focus group A). When I asked why it is like this, one of the girls first said that it has something to do with other people’s worshipping. Maybe she meant that other people, who are in contact with the gods, should not be polluted by their uncleanness. But then she said that she does not really know the reason. This is something they think about, and they are curious for an explanation. When they ask their parents or relatives about it they do not get any answers, they just say that they should follow what they are told and not question what the elders say, because they know better. This comment by one of the Cuttipatti girls also shows that the girls sometimes do what they see others in the family do.

I have always seen my mother keep away from others during her period, so I thought that I should do the same (Thara, Cuttipatti)

Interestingly they added that if you sit in a chair during your period by mistake, because you forgot about your menstruation, then it is okay. It is just bad if you do it on purpose. They told that in some houses women have their own plates and drinking cups, especially in the families where they are doing pilgrimage (which means they are more religious, and more strict with the rules). In Cuttipatti one girl explains that she needs to follow more strict menstrual rules during the pilgrimage time.

Every time I menstruate I cannot touch holy things or go to the temple. But during the pilgrimage time, I cannot touch anything at all in the house. (Vidyhya, Cuttipatti)

The girls in the focus groups never mentioned the word unclean or dirty when talking about the restrictions connected to menstruation. It is obvious that this is a central concept in hindu thoughts, and this thoughts is also linked with the restrictions the girls told me about. Therefore, I directly asked the girls in the end of one interview if they ever felt dirty in any way during their periods. They all answered no in Anilpatti, but in Babupatti they answered that you are unclean and therefore can not go to the temple. They also added restrictions like “not play around too much” or “go out after the sun is down” (Focus group A and B).

In Anilpatti I asked if there is anything positive about these different rules. The girls all agreed that there are positive things about it. But since they do not get any information about it they do not know why. I understand this in a way that the girls know that it must be something positive about it
because it is the rule and tradition, but they have not figured out why, and it is something they are wondering about. At this part of the interview with the Anilpatti girls, one of the girls brought up an explanation to the taboos I heard the leader of the adolescent groups, and my supervisor, had told the week before. She said that in earlier times women did not use sanitary pads and their hygiene was not very good, so they smelled and were too dirty to be, for example, in the temple (Focus group A). In Cuttipatti, when I asked focus group 2 about what they feel about the restrictions, one girl expressed negative feelings about not to be able to go along with her family to religious happenings or family events such as weddings.

I feel left behind. Sometimes there is a festival in another place, then I can’t go with the others and I feel alone. (Aadiya, Cuttipatti)

I learned that women always have a head bath, i.e. a shower where you wash your hair, the first day of their periods (K.A Chandra). The girls in Cuttipatti reported that they will have a head bath the first and the seventh day after their periods (Focus group C1). In the thesis of Kihlgren all the women said that it was the bath that made them pure again after menstruation (2009: 38) The purifying bath is found in other situations in hindu practice as well as in other cultures (for example muslim’s washing of hands and feet before prayer), so it its obvious that the bath is a typical way to cleanse yourself, not only from physical uncleanness, but also from symbolic dirt.

5.5.2 Do not touch!

It is believed that lemon\textsuperscript{10} has spiritual powers and the ability to protect from spirits and bad luck. That is why all the girls in my study were told to always keep one when they are menstruating, as well as a piece of iron. Lemons are commonly seen in temples or home alters, as well as put on different vehicles where they also serve to ward of evil spirits. This is an example of a menstrual customs that aim to protect the girls, and are not connected to the protection of others, from the girl, as many of the other rules. That women should cover their faces while going out or not go out at all during the dark ours are also connected to the protection of women which are in a vulnerable state due to the menstruation. Buckley and Gottlieb emphasised that there should be a distinction

\textsuperscript{10} What is referred to as lemon is what we would call a lime fruit. Lemon does not hear mean the big yellow fruits, but smaller green ones. I will call it lemon because that is what people in the area call it.
between different types of menstrual customs or taboos according to what purpose they serve. There where no reports in the study of restrictions for other people in connection to the woman. As I understand it, all of the taboos concerned the action of the woman (like not touching things or not going to the temple) and they serve to protect other people and keep the woman from polluting holy places or things, not so much to protect the woman herself. Buckley and Gottlieb describe it as common that the restrictions serve to protect especially men, but this is nothing that was expressed by my informants. When the girl sits in seclusion for the first menstruation she should especially not talk to men. Otherwise it seemed like all the restrictions for a menstruating woman concerned the contact with both men and women equally, and that the pollution could harm both as much. The message from Buckley and Gottlieb was that no universal interpretations could be made about menstrual taboos. However, it could be suspected that there are ideas claiming that there is a stronger risk for men to be harmed, since this idea is so frequent in other cultures view on menstruation. My research does not cover all aspects of the taboos, and it is likely that there are notions that did not come up during the interviews.

One thing that puzzles me is the explanation from the girls that it is only bad if you would touch things or sit in a chair with purpose during your menstruation not if you do it by mistake. The way I understand the ideas of pollution in hinduism, a menstruating women would still be able to contaminate the chair even if it was unconscious. Maybe the girls comment could have to do with the concept of karma. If you do not do it with purpose it will at least not affect your karma in a bad way. However the question about breaking the taboos unconsciously is an interesting factor to consider.

5.6.1 When the girls become mothers

Recurrently during the focus groups interviews the girls talked in ways that showed that most of the menstrual customs are done because “it is the tradition”. I asked the girls in the focus groups how they think they will do with the seclusion and Sadangu in the future if they have daughters. In Anilpatti the girls first said that they will have to ask the elders in the family how to do it. Then they said that they will give the opportunity to the daughter to decide if she wants to do it or not. In the other villages, many of the girls where of the opinion that they will not make the daughters sit in one place for some days like they had. They would still, however, have her at home, and always inside the house those days. Some girls had themselves been sitting outside the house, and they
were considering if the daughter would sit outside the house or if she could be inside: Ohter considered if the daughter would sit in a corner or if she could move around in the house.

_We will not make our daughters sit in that way. I would let my daughter walk around in the house, and later we can clean the whole house instead._ (Sati, Cuttipatti)

_I couldn’t let her sit outside, I would let her be inside the house._ (Meena, Cuttipatti)

_We will give all freedom. No separate place or plate_ (Kaaya, Univ. student)

_I will not make my daughter sit in a corner. I would let her move around, but the rest of the ceremony will be like the tradition_ (Maaruthi, Babupatti)

The Sadangu ceremony seemed to be more accepted among the girls, but some also suggested that they will skip that as well.

_We will have the sadangu ceremony. We will do it in the same way. With a lot of people and a big function_ (Sandi, Cuttipatti)

_I will not have the Sadangu. I have to much negative experience from that_ (Riyana, University student)

When I talked to the four university students and asked why they have the tradition with the seclusion and Sadangu they also referred to the tradition.

_It is the routine, and people usually just say that this is something that has been done earlier._ (Ponnamal, University student)

At one point during the interview with the university students I mentioned that in earlier times we had similar restrictions for menstruating women in Sweden as well, for example that women should not go to church. Then one girl said that a lot of the restrictions will probably change in India too.

_When we will be parents we will not have the restrictions, so it will change here, like it changed in Sweden._ (Vijya, University student)
When asked more about what will change, they answered that all the restrictions will change, except the one about worshipping and entering the temples.

Another thing that might start to change is the custom with keeping an iron and lemon with you. At first I just heard that everybody was keeping one, and it seemed to be a very established and commonly practiced custom that was not questioned. I was therefore surprised when the girls in Babupatti reported that they were told by their mothers to always have a piece of iron and a lemon during their menstruations, but that they did not do this. They were told that a spirit otherwise could enter the body, but they did not believe it. I asked if they told their parents that they are not following the advice. They said no, if they would tell their mothers they would argue and be mad at them, so they just do not tell them.

5.6.2 Following the Tradition?

That the girls do not believe in evil spirit shows that the girls in this village have started to question the meaning of the traditions, and they do not believe in the ideas about ghosts or evil spirits. My guess is that these girls will not care much about the lemon and iron when they have daughters. Important to keep in mind when talking about what they will do as grown ups is that they will still be under the influence of and mainly ruled by the elders in the family. The same is with the rest of the village, which usually keeps good track about what is going on in the different families. To skip the seclusion for example could be hard to actually go through with, when it actually comes around. Nevertheless it says a lot that this is what the girls have in mind now when thinking about the future.

It is also clear that the way the puberty ritual is performed today is different from how it was only some generations ago. It was then more common that the girls were sitting in seclusion outside, perhaps in a cowshed, and they where sitting more days, usually around sixteen days (K.A Chandra). Now almost all girls are allowed to sit inside the house. Where this change has come from is hard to say. That the girls stay in seclusion for only some days has a clear connection to the fact that girls nowadays go to school and the families do not want them to miss more schooldays.

5.7.1 Hygiene and Comfort
The girls in the questionnaire study were asked, what kind of sanitary protection they used. The question had multiple choices and the result is shown in Table 7.

Table 7. What kind of material do you use during your menstruation?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Adolescent group meetings</th>
<th>No adolescent group meetings</th>
<th>Total:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anilpatti and Babupatti</td>
<td>Darmapatti</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloth</td>
<td>31,5 % (12)</td>
<td>47,5 % (19)</td>
<td>40 % (31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloth pads</td>
<td>23,5 % (9)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>11% (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only underwear</td>
<td>5 % (2)</td>
<td>2,5 % (1)</td>
<td>4 % (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disposable pads</td>
<td>40 % (15)</td>
<td>50 % (20)</td>
<td>45 % (35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total:</td>
<td>100 % (38)</td>
<td>100 % (40)</td>
<td>100% (78)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Anilpatti and Babupatti, villages with adolescent group meetings where sanitary pads had been sewn, almost 24 % used cloth pads that they made themselves. In Darmapatti the girls where not introduced to this custom. They had a higher number of girls that used only cloth, 48 % compared to Anilpatti’s 32%. Around half of the girls bought disposable pads.

Also the girls in the focus groups were asked about their sanitary protection. In Anilpatti all of the six girls used handmade cloth pads. They found that the cloth pads stayed in place better compared to the cloth. The pads the girls were given instructions to, had buttons sewn to the wings so they could be attached to the underwear. The girls explained that they use the pads for two to three months and then make new ones, because they do not like the stains that stays on the fabric (Focus group A). One of the Cuttipatti girls told that she had changed from disposable pads to the hand made cloth pads. The reason for the change was not the cost but that she finds the cloth pads better. The Babupatti girls are all using disposable pads. One of the girls had been using the cloth pads from the adolescent group before, but she said that she was not allowed to wash and reuse the cloth pads by her family. They mentioned that none of the girls from the adolescent groups were washing and reusing the cloth pads. If they used them they disposed them after only one use (Focus group B). The university students explained that nowadays young people are using disposable pads, and that their own mothers are still using only cloth.

As well as the lack of information about the body functions, the knowledge about the importance
of hygiene and how to use the cloth or pads are sometimes not shared with the girls. One of the university students reported that she did not know until one year after her first menstruation how to use the pads. Asked how they felt during their periods they said they were stressed and worried that the pads would leak (Focus group U). The question about money was also discussed in the focus group. None of the girls reported that it was a problem to afford to buy pads. However the Babupatti girls explained that sometimes they get money from their parents, but sometimes they need to take it from their own savings. For example if they have got money for something else, and they have some spare money left. 8 pads cost 24 rupees (0.34 euro) and they need 1-2 packages every month.

In the interview with the university professor I learned that the health risks by using unclean cloth as sanitary protection are not always known by women in India. In a survey made by the university they found that women in rural areas used old saris, or whatever fabric they could spare, and that the fabric was usually not washed before. Some even used the fabric from old jute bags as protection. This could cause itching and infections. She said that even though it was a problem it was not something that was discussed.

It caused many problems, in some cases even deaths. Everything was kept a secret, women did not talk open about it, and they did not go to the doctor. We discussed with the women, and gave them training on how to make cloth napkins.

(Dr N. Lalitha, Department of Rural Development)

2004 a NGO connected to the university set up a small factory for production of their own brand of disposable pads run by a self help group of women. The purpose was to generate an income as well as improve the protection of women´s health in rural areas (N. Lalitha, 2004: 214). K.A Chandra the project leader for the CIRHEP adolescent groups, had noticed that some of the girls in the villages had problems with menstrual pain, fungus infections and itching. She connected this with the custom to reuse the same cloth without washing and drying it properly. Some girls keep the cloth under the roof instead of drying it out in the sun (K.A Chandra).

The feminist group Koodu (Tamil for nest and gathering) is located in one of the bigger cities in Tamil Nadu, and also engaged in spreading information about menstruation. They have have noticed that the big increase of disposable pads causes new garbage problems. In the villages the girls usually burn their pads, but that possibility do not people in the densely populated city have. The group has therefore started to promote reusable cloth pads as an alternative (Koodu, personal contact).
5.7.2 Introduction of new Sanitary Pads

My study indicates that the use of disposable pads from the store has increased considerably in a short time. Compared to the study of Naryan et al. my results show a high number of girls using disposable pads. The Naryan study from 2001 reported that around 83% used old cloth and around 2% used only disposable pads. 5% used disposables part of the time. My study on the other hand showed that among the girls in my study area around 45% use the disposable pads. It is positive that more girls get adequate and hygienic sanitary protection. The problems with the waste the disposable pads creates should however not be neglected. Both Indian villages and cities have already huge problems handling waste in a sustainable manner, and all efforts to reduce the waste are positive.

Part of this study aimed to evaluate how the introduction of reusable cloth pads by CIRHEP was received by the girls. The questionnaire showed that only a fourth of the girls from the villages, where the cloth pads had been introduced, still used the handmade pads. The idea that the pads could be reused over and over again seemed to be hard to implement since the girls did not like that the stains remained on the fabric. There were also a reluctance in the families to wash and reuse pads or cloth. To further spread the use of cloth pads, an improvement of the model and the fabric, should first be considered.

5.8 Initiatives for Change

In the following section some different projects in Tamil Nadu, that aim to improve women’s situation regarding menstruation, will be presented.

CIRHEP

As mentioned earlier, CIRHEP has been giving information to teenage girls about reproductive health through the adolescent groups. The organisation invites guest lecturers like nurses and social workers to share their special knowledge in the field. An initiative to start making reusable sanitary pads together with the girls has been taken. Reusable pads are cheaper than the disposable ones and better for the body than the paper/plastic pads or the sometimes unclean cloths. They are also more comfortable to use than cloth, and they create no waste as the disposable ones. The meeting where the pads are sewn also opens up for discussions about menstruation and give the girls opportunity to
ask questions.

The project leader, K.A Chandra, explained why she wanted to start the groups.

_I am born in the village, so I know about the situation for the girls. I remember how it was for me. For example the cloth that we folded and used during our period chafed and could cause a lot of pain. Because of my own experience I want to give the girls awareness about sanitary napkins, hygiene, nutrition and women’s rights_ (K.A Chandra)

She mentioned that one reason for the groups is to prepare the girls to become good mothers. That makes it important to talk about reproductive health and proper nutrition.

_Good mothers mean healthy mothers_ (K.A Chandra)

Kudumbam

The non-governmental organisation Kudumbam (Tamil for family), is located in the same region as CIRHEP and is also working with adolescents. They have recently started a project in cooperation with Save the Children, Lund (a local group of Save the Children in Sweden), where Indian sociology students are trained to lead discussion groups for twelve to fifteen year old schoolchildren. The original model for the discussion groups comes from Sweden but have been translated and adapted to the Indian context. The meetings mainly aim to give children awareness and knowledge about their rights. For each session the leaders meet with the children, a special theme is discussed. For the Indian version a session about puberty has been added, called “Me and my body”, because Kudumbam saw a need for this. Here the boys and girls are divided into separate groups. For the girls this session would focus a lot on menstruation issues.

When asked how they feel about discussing such a sensitive topic like this with the girls, one of the sociology students said:

_We should not feel shy when we talk to the girls, because then the girls will not feel shy either_ (Gajoni, sociology student)

I asked if they thought there could be people that are against the discussion groups at the schools

---

11 The groups run by Save the Children in Sweden are called Ellen and Allan groups. The Indian version is named Lalitha and Babu.
and how they, in that case, would handle that. They said they will only take a class if the children are interested. If the parents do not like it, they will try to convince them and explain how important this is. On the question about how they would do if the teachers object one of the women commented like this, followed by laughter from the whole group:

“Then we will teach the teachers” (Varthika, sociology student)

They said that they think it is good if they can influence the schools to start talking more about puberty and reproductive health. They are hopeful that they will influence the schools with their meetings, because they all think that this is an important subject.

Koodu

The feminist group Koodu started in 2004, and consists today of around 40 women from different fields, such as lawyers, social workers, professors and housewives. The group has created a booklet on menstruation as to give information and support to teenage girls. The booklet is now distributed through different NGOs, schools and colleges. Except from physical explanations about menstruation the booklet also includes stories about personal experience from the women themselves.

*It started when we had a meeting where somebody showed a female condom.*
*That led to that we started to talk about menstrual hygiene, and our own experience.*
*And then we thought, why not make a booklet about this!* (Danah, Koodu)

The response to the booklet has been very good and they feel that it is much needed. A girl once said to them that “we read about the frogs anatomy in school, but not about our own bodies”. They get a lot of feedback not only from teenage girls, but also from their mothers, and sometimes even from men.

*We say in the booklet that this is also for men to read. And when we have public seminars sometimes men come because they are curious about what all the women are doing together. Then we say “excuse me sir, this is also for you, read this!” This is a good way for men to understand women better.* (Neera, Koodu)

Neera works with the government to make education material for the schools. She is a consult on women’s issues. She says that in the school material they only include the part about the biological aspects, and they are not allowed to include stories about peoples own experience or any cultural aspect.
Our government is very patriarchal. They don’t see the gender issues, and they don’t want to break the culture. We feminists expect something more (Neera, Koodu)

They said that most of the information is completely new to the girls and emphasised the need to talk more about these issues.

Because this is something you can not talk openly about within your family, the booklet becomes like a friend when they read it (Danah, Koodu)

Excerpts from the booklet can be found in appendix 3.

Eco femme
Auroville Village Action group, has recently started to manufacture pads in the organisation of women’s self help groups, like the NGO linked to the university that was mentioned earlier. This group however, only makes reusable cloth pads. Eco femme, which is the name of the group and the brand, has specialised in making the pads in different models so they will suit both urban and rural women, as well as the western market. They have developed one model that you can roll out so it just looks like a towel when you dry it outside. The fabric, purple cotton flannel, has been chosen with care. It is easy to wash and does not leave stains. Eco femme has not started to sell the pads yet. First they want to make a pilot study and get them evaluated by the women and adolescent girls to see if there is anything to be improved. The original idea was to just sew cloth pads for export in the Self help groups as an income generating activity. However, the response from the rural women when they started taking about sanitary protection and menstruation was overwhelming. This led, not only to a decision to also produce cheap pads for the villages, but also to start up educational seminars for women about menstruation (Eco Femme, personal contact).

School curriculum and other governmental initiatives
Also the Tamil state government has projects that gives information about reproductive issues. Geeta, the social worker, is working with a scheme called the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). Geeta explained that this scheme was initiated as an attempt to prevent infant mortality. The authorities had noticed an increase and they saw a connection between the deaths and early marriages, bad nutrition and hygiene practice.

Some girls get married at 15, so it is important that they know about this (Geeta)
In the monthly meetings for adolescent girls (there is also one group for women and one for children) topics like work issues, women’s rights, marriage, nutrition and reproductive health is discussed. In the material that is used instructions about how to make your own sanitary pad out of cloth is included.

Geeta told that in some of the villages there are parents who think that it is bad to teach the girls about these things. They think it will spoil the girls.

_Sometimes I get in a fight with them. And they can say things like_ 
_“who do you think you are, coming here and talk to the girls. But in some 
villages the parents thinks it is a good thing. It has a lot to do if the 
parents are educated or not (Geeta)_

The objection from the parents is mentioned by Dr. Lalitha, university professor, as a reason why reproductive issues are not included in the school curriculum.

_Now it is not included because some parents disapprove. They think it will 
spoil the girls. They want to keep it a secret. They are also worried that the boys 
will know, and start to tease the girls._
_The biological process should be explained. During what ages a women is 
menstruating and so on. Everything should be explained to them in a 
scientific way. Sex education should be introduced in the schools. (Dr. Lalitha)_

She also motivates why it is important to focus especially on women.

_When women learn many generations learn._
_The women will pass it on and the message will be spread (Dr. Lalitha)_

K. A Chandra emphasise that some headmasters and headmistress are very interested in these things, and that all government schools do have some reproductive education, about the changes in the body for example. But this is never earlier than 8\textsuperscript{th} standard (13 years) and sometimes not until 12\textsuperscript{th} standard (17 years). Chandra also talked about the different roles between the schools and the NGOs.

_To include it in the syllabus is good. But the NGOs role is important anyway._
_The NGO staff will put more effort in it, and they work all ours, even in the evenings._
_The teachers only think about their working hours and their salaries._
_The NGO staff is very close to the people. We are working alongside with the people._
_The negative thing is that the NGO staff is changing frequently (K.A Chandra)_
In November 2011 the Tamil state government announced that they will provide free sanitary pads for rural adolescents in the age group of 10-19 years. The scheme, which is the first of its kind in the country, will cost around 440 000 000 indian rupees (6 million euros). Each girl will get 18 bags a year with six pads in each bag. The bags will be distributed through the schools and with the help of staff from the Integrated Child Development Services and nurses in the villages. Included in the scheme is that pits should be dug up in the villages to bury the used napkins and brick kilns built in the schools so the pads can be disposed in a safe manner (The Hindu 2011).
6. Discussion and Conclusions

The conclusions from this thesis show that menstruation is a complex part of the lives of Tamil girls. Aspects of menstruation include puberty rituals, different restrictions, evil spirits and the ability to handle hygiene and worries about the changing body with very little information. The theoretical background has been a valuable base when working with the research and the material, and has given entries both to what kind of questions to ask and how to interpret the empirical material. The results from previous studies, have in many ways confirmed what was found in this study. The research by Garg et. al, Khanna et. al and Naryan et. al support the results which show that girls are not given enough information either before or after the time of menarche. This causes worries and uncertainty about what is going on in the body as well as for the social changes, for example if the girls can continue school or not. It seems though, that the girls in Tamil Nadu are more prepared now than ten years back, which a comparison between mine and Naryan’s results shows. The recurrent comment from the informants was that “people do not talk openly about this (menstruation)”. However, the possibility to go through with this study as well as conducting the adolescent group meetings with CIRHEP, shows that it is not unacceptable to bring up the issue. Under the right circumstances it can be possible to talk freely about menstruation. The silence does not seem to come from a total ban. My analysis would rather be that people are unaccustomed to discuss menstruation, and therefore do not talk about it. I also see that the families and the schools do not recognize the need, or the benefits, for girls to know more about menstruation and puberty. Learning about the restriction and the rituals take all focus, and people do not see the purpose of learning about physiology. The main function for an Indian girl in rural societies, and the biggest concern for the families, is that she stays pure and honourable and gets married into a good family, and for that she does not need to understand the physiology of menstruation. Not even all of the girls themselves seemed to feel the urge for more information. In Darmapatti, where the girls were unaccustomed to talk about menstruation, half of the group reported that they did not want to learn more about menstruation.

Despite this, it is clear that with extended information, the difficulties that come with menstruation would be much easier for the girls to handle. In the interviews many girls mentioned menstrual pain and premenstrual syndrome, and the favours from learning about it. To get an explanation and told that it is a natural process and nothing harmful, seemed to mean a lot to them. The health issues that were reported from the local gynaecologist also indicate that the girls are having unnecessary worries about normal functions in the body.

That the girls know about their bodies’ reproductive functions will be of importance in their future
lives as women and mothers, especially with the extended use of contraceptives in rural areas. To be able to make carefully prepared choices and take care of your health, knowledge is of course essential. Apart from this I see it as a human right to know about your own body. Awareness projects, especially the governmental, tend to see that the purpose of giving adolescent girls reproductive knowledge, is to prepare them for reproducing healthy children (Bhavnani 2003: 82). To strengthen the rights of women, I think it is important to recognise that educating teenage girls about puberty has a value own its on, not only to prepare them to become good mothers.

It is evident that there is a big need for more knowledge to be spread to adolescent girls about menstruation. I believe that the best result would be reached by a combination of more information from both the schools and the families, as well as from NGOs. The different initiatives, that are taken in India today to give awareness to the girls and provide them with adequate sanitary protection, are hopefully the starting signal for a further development.

Close to the aspect of information is that of hygiene and health. Khanna et. al found in their study that there is a relation between the level of information and safe menstrual practice. They also reported that poor menstrual hygiene lead to more reproductive tract infections. It is welcoming that more organisations are promoting different kinds of sanitary pads. First priority should be that girls get access to safe menstrual practice. In that way the decision from the Tamil government to subsidise free pads for rural girls is a big step forward. The next step should be to promote the use of sustainable and cheap pads. The reusable cloth pads are a good alternative, especially when produced in Women self help groups, as the ones from Eco Femme.

The loss of freedom the girls experience when they get matured, was seen to start directly at the time of menarche, and is therefore negatively connected to menstruation. Some of the girls even said that they where not happy to get menstruation because they did not want it to come so early. The strong connection with the strict rules and menarche that is shown, can be problematic since the girls are sometimes very young when it occurs nowadays, and they can hardly be considered as women yet. As mentioned, there is a need to also work with the young men in the area, especially to reduce sexual harassments that was said to be part of the reason why the girls need to stay inside. In 2013, CIRHEP is planning to start adolescent groups for boys, where reproductive health and gender equality will be part of the programme. In addition to the adolescent group meetings CIRHEP also approach the parents. Hopefully, when they now also start to talk about the boys’ situation, it could encourage to a discussion about how the society and families can handle the contact between boys and girls, which is seen as problematic.

Central for the thesis was also the traditional customs and rituals connected to menstruation. Both the seclusion and the Sadangu ceremony are clear cases of initiation rituals. They mark the passage
from the phase as a child, into the new phase, where the girl becomes a woman, as described by Victor Turner. When the girls are isolated they are in a state in between the two phases, where normal rules do not apply. The girl should sit by herself and the family members do not have much contact with her. The seclusion is also connected to impurity. Some of the girls were not allowed inside the house for a whole month after their first menstruation and had to sleep outside, which shows that some of the communities are still following the traditions to a great extent. However, even for these girls the tradition had changed over time and now they only sit in seclusion for five days and then are allowed to go to school, even if they are not allowed in the house until after a month. This is an example of a compromise between the traditional customs and the modern values which see education for girls as important.

The Sadangu ceremony is interesting to study since it contains elements that can be connected to the marriage system, which is central for the Indian society. During the ceremony the girl is dressed up like a bride would be. It was seen that the uncle on the mother’s side plays an important role because he, or his son’s, could be the girls groom in the future. The tradition to marry within the family is still practiced in the villages. Unfortunately, it leads to inbreeding and disabilities among the children that are born. Even if the uncle is not the contemplated husband he still has an important role in the girl’s life. This is also confirmed by Victor Turner and is something that can be found in other cultures as well.

From the focus groups it was shown that many girls feel very uncomfortable about the puberty rituals. The results indicate that there is a difficulty for the girls to see a purpose for the rituals. My feeling when I spoke with the girls was that for them the rituals and customs were “empty”, with no meaning. They could not give any explanations to why the rituals were performed, they just referred to it as the tradition. Could the reason be, like Frans Staal (1979) expressed, “the meaningless of ritual”? That people pay more attention on following the rules correctly than the actual meaning or thought behind the ritual. Still, there is the possibility that the question was not asked in the right way, and that the girls do possess an understanding of the ritual but could not express it. A likely explanation is that there is no need for the girls to have the understanding. Like Victor Turner supposed, the meaning and the structure lays within the community as a whole, even if it is not clear for each individual. Interestingly the girls expressed a possibility to not follow the traditions in the future, by renegotiating some of the rituals, like to let their future daughters move around in the house during the seclusion. This must also have been the case for previous generations since it is seen now that some of the elements of the rituals and menstrual taboos have adapted and changed over time, like to move the kudisai to the inside of the house during seclusion and accepting that women cook during their periods. That the rituals are changeable proofs that they are not just a
“dead weight of tradition” as quoted from Mary Douglas earlier.

Described in the thesis are also the menstrual taboos that restrict women from different things. The girls reported going to the temple and participating in religious events (in general all family festivities) as the most common restrictions. That was sometimes seen as negative among the girls and made them feel left out. Other rules like taking a purifying head bath and keeping a lemon was very widespread among the girls in the study area. This customs was not connected to any specific bad feelings. However, it was interesting to hear that some of the girls did not follow the tradition, even if they pretended to in front of their parents. That indicates that these traditions might come to change over time.

When I first heard about the taboos for women and the seclusion, mandatory for the girls at menarche, I immediately connected it with the oppression of women. Learning about the customs more and applying the thoughts of Buckley and Gottlieb, as well as Douglas´ theory on purity and pollution, I see it from a wider perspective. The notion of menstruation is part of a bigger system of ideas of purity and pollution and a natural part of hinduism. However, I do still believe that women in many ways are affected negatively by the menstrual customs, and that the observation and possible renegotiation of the negative aspects could be of great benefit for all girls and women.

For future research in the field it would be interesting to see a more profound study about Tamil female puberty rites and its symbolism. I would also suggest further research on the use of cloth sanitary pads and the benefits they can give. Finally, I would like to make a call for a study about the concept of combining production of sanitary pads, as a small scale income generating activity for women, with awareness programmes about menstruation.
7. References


Hindu, the 2011. “Rs. 44.21-crore scheme to provide sanitary napkins announced”. 2011-11-04. 
http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-tamilnadu/article2596564.ece

Read 2012-02-10. Chennai


Staal, Frits (1979). “The meaningless of ritual”. Numen 26, s. 2-22


**Interviews:**

Focus group A  2012-01-31, 2012-02-05
Focus group B  2012-02-17
Focus group C1  2012-02-07, 2012-02-12
Focus group C2  2012-02-15
Focus group U  2012-02-13

Social worker, Integrated Child Development Services 2012-02-12
Gynaecologist, Governmental Hospital Nilakottai  2012-02-01
K. A Chandra, project leader and supervisor in field, CIRHEP 2012-02-17
Sociology students, 11 women, Kudumbam 2012-02-08
Dr. Lalitha, Department of Rural Development, Gandhigram University  2012-02-13
Koodu group leaders  2012-02-18
Project leader Eco femme 2012-03-09
Appendix 1. Interview guide

Can you tell me about your family? What do your parents do? How many brother and sisters?
Age? What standard?

Have you been participating in the menstruation training with CIRHEP?

When did you get your first menstruation?
Can you tell me about it? How did it feel? Where you surprised? Happy? Scared? Embarrassed?

2. What happened then?

3. Can you remember what you were thinking while you were sitting in the corner?

4. What did you hear about menstruation?
5. Who talked to you?
6. What were you told regarding hygiene during menstruation?

7. Tell me about sadangu? Did you have it?
8. What did you think about it? What happened?
9. Why is it your uncle (mothers brother) that will come and give you a sari?

10. How will you do it if you had a daughter in the future?

11. Can you tell me what you need to think about when you are menstruating?
12. What happens if you don’t follow this customs?
13. What kind of rules are you following when you are menstruating?
14. Any restrictions? Do you do anything special? Don’t do some things?
15. What do you think/how do you feel about this restrictions/rules?

16. Different status for a girl after she came of age? How? What changes?

17. Do you eat differently when you are menstruating? Healthy food? Something you talk about in the family?

18. Where do you think the blood comes from? What is it? How would you describe menstruation (blood)?
19. Why do women have menstruation?
(Why do women have menstruation according to traditional belief?)

3. Do you think the boys know what menstruation is? Or know anything about it? Do they tease you?
4. Is there anybody you can talk with if you have any problems or questions about menstruation?

5. Do you feel embarrassed to talk about menstruation?

6. Who can you talk to?

7. What kind of protection do you use? How? Do you wash the cloth (if using this)? Where do you dry it?

8. Do you get any money to buy napkins or new cloth from your family?

9. How did it work with the cloth napkins? Did you like them?

10. If you have stopped using them, how come?

11. What do you remember from the training about menstruation in the adolescent group?

12. What did you learn?

13. Have you shared any of the information with anybody?

14. Have you noticed anybody to be negative against the activities in the adolescent group?

15. Is there anything you would like to know more about, or talk more about?

16. Do you think it would be good if the schools had more teaching about menstruation?

17. From what age?
Appendix 2. Questionnaire

1. When did you get your first menstruation?

2. Did you know about menstruation before you menstruated?
   - Yes
   - No

3. a If you did know about it, who told you?
   - sister
   - mother
   - Friend
   - Relative

3. b What were you told?

4. a When you first menstruated who told you that you came of age?
   - sister
   - mother
   - Friend
   - Relative

4. b What did they tell you?

5. What kind of traditional customs are you following?

7. What kind of material do you use?
   - Old cloth
   - Hand-made napkins
   - Only underwear
   - Napkins bought from the store

8. If you use hand-made napkins, how many times do you reuse it?

9. a Do you think you need more understanding and knowledge about menstruation?
9. b If you do, what kind of information do feel you need?

10. Did you take part in the awareness programme about menstruation conducted by CIRHEP earlier?

    Yes
    No
Appendix 3.

Excerpts from the menstruation booklet

Personal stories by women about the experience of menstruation, from the booklet published by Koodu. Translated to English from Tamil.

A 14-year old girl had a lot of pimples on her face. Her father assumed that she was having a secret affair with a man at her college. So her father took her out of college saying that she does not need to study at all. (Guani)

Lilli found blood stains in her dad’s dhotis (trad. men’s garment) very often when she had to do the laundry at home. He had internal haemorrhoids. But her dad never noticed the stains. She used to think “I care about my dads stained clothes and his problems and I help him. I do not get ashamed of washing and drying his clothes where people might see it, but why do mum and I have to hide the cloth that we use during menstruation and why do we get ashamed?” (Lilli)

One day, I got off a bus at the bus stand. I went to use the restroom near the bus stand. We had to pay a fee to use it. Since it was early morning there was a long queue. A man was collecting money from the people. He took one rupee from men and three from women. When asked about why he said in a very insulting tone “men use the toilets only to urinate or shit, unlike women”. That “unlike” in his sentence meant menstruation and bleeding. “Can they charge women extra just for that reason? If yes, what extra facilities do the women have in there toilets?” asked the lady? (Mansura)

I work in a stone quarry. I get paid 50 rupees a day from breaking stones into pebbles. The pain and the tiredness is always to be expected to the end of the day, but on the days I have my menstruation it is exhausting. My mind and body will beg for a day’s rest but I can’t allow that to happen because I need that 50 rupees, that is a hard day’s
work, to survive. So I drag myself to work. (Kannamal)