

Experience of Menarche: Pain and Celebration in Selected Modern Indian Narratives

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Abstract

Menstruation has been meted out with an unjustified treatment in the discourse of literature for many centuries. Where most writers of the past have tried to pigeon hole menstrual and menarcheal experiences as uncomfortable, unwanted, mysterious and evil; it is the job of the modern writers to bring out the humanistic aspects to menarche and menstruation, thus aiming for eventual de-tabooification. The present study tries to analyze the experiences of menarche containing both celebratory and painful tones through the medium of Modern Indian Narratives that comprise *My Story* by Kamala Das, *Mayil Will Not Be Quiet!* by Niveditha Subramaniam and Sowmya Rajendran, *I Died a Little* by Soibam Haripriya, *First Flush* by Anamika, *Udaylee* by Sujata Bhatt, *Kocharethi* by Narayan, *The Moth Eaten Howdah of Tusker* by Indira Goswami and *Paas Sootalar Kathakata* by Arupa Patangia Kalita. The study tries to establish that the selected texts on experiences of menarche try to bring forth the multifacetedness of a human experience that has long been hidden under the debris of patriarchal and misogynistic customs and beliefs.

Keywords: Menarche, Pain, Celebration, female body, menstrual discourse.

Menstruation has been a rare issue of discussion in Indian literature from the point of view of a lived experience. Jyoti Puri (1999) in, *Woman, Body, Desire in Post-Colonial India: Narratives of Gender and Sexuality* says that the Indian contemporary literature looks at the female body under the categories of tradition and modernity and patriarchy. This is markedly seen in the narratives on the menstrual discourse. The concepts of menarche and menstruation are analyzed under the nexus of changes operating under the influence of industrialization and modernization. The regulation of the female body is not their main focus in discussion. The literature therefore neglects a discussion on the nature of the female body, womanhood and lived experience (Puri, 1999, p. 44). As she observes:

Nowhere are the contradictions of the private, individual nature of the female body more evident than at the onset of menstruation in the life of a young girl. In any cultural context, a “natural” event such as monthly bleeding has a particular significance and is coded to include and exclude a

range of meanings. In contemporary India, menarche and menstruation signify the emergent gender and sexual status of the hitherto presexual and prepubertal girl...so thorough is the perception of menstruation shaped by cultural knowledges and practices that it is impossible to argue menstruation is a “natural” event...where menstruation is presented as a personalized and individualized domain of experience, it calls for a healthy dose of feminist skepticism. (Ibid.)

The discourse of menstruation can be divided into various categories such as taboos, rituals, customs, menarche, menopause, mother-daughter bonding, etiquettes and so on. Each category finds its presence in different Indian language literatures. Due to a lack of translation only a few narratives are accessible to a larger readership. Some narratives are stories of women that comprise the different stages of their life. During the course of these narrations, one can find mention of her menarche and her experience at the time of her first period. The present paper tries to investigate the various experiences of menarche, associated with pain and celebration presented in selected modern Indian narratives.

It is true that women experience menarche differently. Some are aware about the bodily changes before hand, and for some it may come as a surprise. Each woman has a different relationship with her body. The cultural and social background of the girl also decides her sense of shame or pride she takes in her body and its biology. This implies that the lived experience of menstruation, typically the welcome of the menarche, can be of various types. Among the different body writings, the onset of menstruation is quiet significant, as it represents the initiation of a girl into womanhood. The experiences at this time can carry in the memory of a girl all her life, leading to many psycho-social effects on the understanding of life. Delaney, Et. Al. comment-

In India, with its thousands of ethnic groups, the menarche is universally a time for rejoicing, even though the customs of different peoples continue to involve seclusion, taboo and the prohibition against seeing the sun or touching the ground. High and low castes observe similar rites. Among the Deshast Brahmins, for example, the first menstruation is a time for seclusion; but at the completion of the seclusion, the girl, seated on a little throne, is visited by neighbors and relatives, given presents, and washed in ceremonial oil. Similarly, a Nayarⁱ girl of India will be visited by neighbor women at the end of the seclusion and dressed in new garments, usually the womanly sari, instead of short dresses she wore as a child. Later, the menstruating girl and her friends undergo a ceremonial bath, followed by a great feast, where “drums are beaten and shouts of joy are given. (Delaney Et. Al, 1988, p. 28)

Contrary to this discussion it may be said that Indian culture varies a great deal when it comes to the menarche of a girl. Some communities consider it an occasion of celebration and that of declaration of her womanhood; while, others consider it to be a secret to be hidden from those around. Either way, the entire experience of the menarche is a very personal and subjective one. The experience of menarche, on the communal and social level may seem to have a commonality. But, at the personal level, each girl experiences menarche and its rites differently.

For centuries the depiction of menstruation in literature has been handled by male authors. A lot of the negativity associated with menstruation can be ascribed to these narratives that have had no semblances of reality, owing to the process of othering, and sexual difference that makes it a blunder in the name of discourse. While most of these negative depictions of menarche and menstruation find their place in ancient and medieval Indian literature, newer writers have begun to try to and understand the nuances of menstruation in society and have brought them forth in their literature.

One of the most popular examples of an autobiography of a woman writer in modern literature is *My Story* by Kamala Das. The text is written under a pen name and with slight modifications, and it is a work of non-fiction in the autobiographical style, where Kamala, narrates the story of her life, from childhood, to adulthood. Apart from narrating the different episodes of her life, one chapter is dedicated to her coming of age. In the chapter titled “Mahabharata” Kamala’s menarche sets in with fainting and appearance of red spots on her clothes. The text clearly depicts the childlike innocence of Kamala; as she was completely unaware of what comprises of menstruation. Her innocence and a sense of fright, which is the plight of many young girls at the time of menarche and thus, depicted as “‘I am ill, I am dying,’ I cried to my mother. ‘Something has broken inside me and I am bleeding.’ My mother lifted my dress and said with a laugh, ‘It is nothing to be worried about, it is what all girls get at twelve or thirteen...’ She asked me to change my dress and taught me to wear sanitary pads. She told me that the blood only showed that I was ready to be a mother.” (Das, 2009, p. 59)

What is noteworthy here is that the girl was unprepared about her period. But at the onset of menarche, there was no fuss as such. The dialogue between her mother and Kamala depicts the sense of normality and commonplaceness associated with menstruation among women, as an indispensable life experience. It is also important to mark, that not only is Kamala’s narrative devoid of the taboos of menstruation; but, also that at the time of her period her maid servant carried her to the prayer room, which shows a lack of menstrual taboo on the account of religious impurity in Kamala’s social and cultural setting. This instance is very peculiar. Kamala who belongs to the native state of Kerala, is one of the rare cases, where menarche seems to produce a nonchalant effect on her family members.

The recent uproar associated with the menstruating women and their entry into the Sabrimala temple, paints a completely different picture of attitude of people towards menstruation. The incident of Kamala's menarche must not allow one to generalize the de-tabooification. What is also ironical is that the chapter that talks about Kamala's menarche is titled *Mahabharata*ⁱⁱ. One of the many images that remain in the conscience of a Indian reader of the *Mahabharata* is the fact that the episode of Draupadi's *cheer haran*ⁱⁱⁱ occurred when she was as a matter of fact menstruating. Much fuss and discourse has been made over the depiction of a menstruating woman being dragged into a room full of men, especially family elders, who are not supposed to see a woman at the time of her menstruation. The title of the chapter sets a great contrast between the taboo ridden depiction of menstruation in *Mahabharata*, the epic and 'Mahabharata' the chapter in Kamala's autobiography. In rarest of literatures, is the menstrual discourse ever discussed as a simple life experience of a woman that need not be associated with danger, evil, mystery and impurity. Kamala's menarche brings hope for the young reader. The tone is neutral. Unlike predecessors of this text, Kamala Das tries to identify menarche and menstruation as a basic life process that needs to be accepted as a mere fact of life. This, though is not true of many other texts.

A similar depiction of the onset of menarche can be seen in the narrative of *Mayil Will Not Be Quiet!* by Niveditha Subramaniam and Sowmya Rajendran. Written in the format of a diary, the text depicts the various episodes in the life of young girl called Mayil. The book is of much importance, as it deals with various anxieties of a teenager and has been recommended to be a part of the school curriculum of CBSE. In the diary entry titled "The Period Is Here" Mayil discloses the occurrence of her first period. Unlike Kamala, in the previous narrative, Mayil, is well aware of the process of menstruation and menarche, owing to her two close friends who have already achieved menarche. Her mother too, had discussed with her how to use a sanitary napkin and the other things to take care of; in case she started her period in school.

The text depicts an urban culture, common among school going girls who address their periods by Euphemisms such as 'chum' which means an intimate friend. Mayil discusses the discomfort associated with menstruation while describing the experience of menarche when she says:

I don't like how the pad feels against my skin. I don't like how it feels when I am walking. I feel like a hen.

I got grumpy and quiet. Amma says I am going to have to get used to that since a sanitary napkin is a foreign object and my body will take time to get used to it...I kept checking for stains and Amma said I don't have to be "so paranoid". Now I am grumpy again. I don't really know why. I don't like

this sticky wet feeling and I don't like looking at my pad every time I have to go to the loo. (Subramaniam & Rajendran, 2015, pp. 45-46)

Apart from the fact that the narrative shows a common place depiction of menstruation in the discourse between women; it also narrates the male response to a girl's puberty: "Appa^{iv} called me and said, "Ok, Mayil. Now you are big girl, you have to act like one. Understood?" Whatever, Thatha^v was the only one who was excited. He was so excited, I was embarrassed at first. What was he so happy about?!" (Subramaniam & Rajendran, 2015, p. 46)

The depiction of the father and grandfather's positive response to the girl's menarche is in stark opposition to what one may see in ancient or medieval narratives on menstruation. Not just that, even today in a true Tamil household, menstruation holds a very stigmatized position for both the male and female members of the community. How then are the authors able to depict such a neutral and positive acceptance of the new change in the young teenager's life? Probably the authors are hopeful that their text may prove to be a corner stone for future generations to learn something from the characters and their dialogue on menstruation depicted in the text. The male figures here present a good example in their acceptance of an important phase in a young girl's life. It may make one believe that things have quite changed in the modern times, where both males and females have accepted menstruation as a normal life experience devoid of a taboo. But this is far from the truth. This may be found among some educated families, or families living in urban spaces. But, orthodox, conservative and religious beliefs about menstruation and its onset are still visible in rural India. In fact, the pain and agony that comes with the onset of menarche, is less to do with the physical, anatomical discomfort and more to do with the social and cultural ostracization. This ostracization is indicated in several studies conducted in Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry that suggest that such a positive response towards menstruation is only a hopeful expectancy on the part of the authors. (See Selvi, K. Tmail & Dr. S. Ramchandran, "Socio Cultural Taboos Concerning Menstruation: A Micro Level Study in the Cuddalore District of Tamil Nadu, India", 2012; Patik, Raj Kumar, et. Al., "Beliefs about Menstruation in Rural Pondicherry", 2011)

The fact that many taboos and etiquettes of impurity and in acceptance towards menstruation and menarche exist in various cultures around India can be found from their analogous treatment in literature from other parts of India. Where the first two texts discussed above set a hopeful tone towards menarcheal discourse in India, there are other texts that reveal the true attitude of people towards menarche. This is depicted in the poem "I Died a Little" by Haripriya, which is selected from an anthology of North Eastern Literature. Few lines from the poem cited below:

I died a little

Killed by impure little droplets
Though there were celebrations
The stained cloth
Became my cloth
For reasons I knew not
My mother said

I was now a complete woman. (Haripriya, 2015, p. (not mentioned))

This poem is just the epitome of the kind of attitude that is prevalent in major sections of Indian society. The reference to ‘impure little droplets’ and the concept of death intertwined with menarche are symbolic of the negative associations accorded to menstruation, not just in the society, but also in the mind of a young girl. The becoming of a woman here is taken to be, not an episode of celebration or happiness but that of pain and agony, though, socially there will be celebrations. It will be seen as mark of her womanhood and capacity to become a mother. The celebration, being an invitation to interested suitors; menarche in itself is troublesome for the girl, as it will cause her to be constantly associated with impurity, each month.

But, the work of literature is not only to project what is the stark reality. Authors have the discursive power to make counter narratives in order to reform the negative beliefs and practices of society. While the majority of the country is far from accepting menstruation and thus menarche as a positive life process and over turning in the narration of images associated with menarche can help further the cause of de-tabooification. Along with the physical and social pain that is manifested in the experience of menarche, some authors, especially new emerging modern Indian women writers have taken to a celebratory tone of menarcheal depiction.

A Hindi poem by Anamika, “The First Flush”, deals with menarche in a very positive light. The depiction of menstruation is associated with the *Yogic*^{vi} sense of self-realization, a bodily harmony that comes into play as the young girl attains puberty and experiences menstrual blood in her body for the first time. The kind of imagery used in the poem in order to represent a special event in a girl’s life, is very self-affirming and celebratory. Thus it is said-

Like Kundalini^{vii}
The Girl Rose
And sat straight on bed.
Which fairy mother

Did care to embroider
Maroon roses all over
Her white pantie?
Why at all in her lower tummy
Seven dwarfs played
Hop-skotch?
Who played ‘ektara^{viii}’ in her thighs?
In the middle of the night.
She rose
Anhad^{ix}-like
And turned and turned around
Like a ‘chakra^x’
In primordial motion (Anamika, 2001, pp. 258-259)

It is noteworthy that a lot of positive imagery such as ‘maroon roses’ for blood stains; ‘seven dwarfs playing hop-scotch’ for menstrual cramps; ‘the motion of the chakra’ for the restlessness due to pain, is used to depict the various experiences of menstruation. The associations with such images not only provides a happy image of the experience of menarche but also gives it a celebratory tone, instead of focusing on the pain and agony, of a bodily painful experience. The kind of positivity associated with menstruation in this poem, helps to debunk the Taboofication associated with its negative image as presented by many male authors in early discourses. Sudheesh Pachauri (2001) says:

To my knowledge, this is the first poem of Hindi to capture the feel of the first flush of menstruation. It enters a forbidden realm with a gusto. Such a might celebration of body was hitherto unknown... This poem gives rise to such a mighty feminist discourse that all male chauvinism stands punctured. By articulating the hereby muted and celebrating the hereby hushed up “feel” of a woman’s might and of her life-time experience—the poem punctures all erotica woven around the “mystique” of the hereby hushed up body discourse. This is the post-modern discourse of protest: history of literature bore no trace of it till now, but see for yourself how poignant this is.

(Pachauri, 2001, p. 259)

The above depiction of this discourse is markedly different among writers of different communities in India. Anamika, being a poetess belonging to Delhi, has captured the nuances of menstruation with much optimism, which owes to her urban backdrop. Similar positive imagery and association with natural earthly events are also depicted in Sujata Bhatt's poem. Though, the poem does not talk of the menarche, the experiences associated with menstruation are thus depicted in a positive light by using metaphors of nature:

When I can't sleep,
I hold the conch shell to my ear
just to hear my blood rushing,
a song throbbing,
a slow drumming within my head, my hips.
This aching is my blood flowing against,
rushing against something
knotted clumps of my blood,
so I remember fistfuls of torn seaweed
rising with the foam,
rising. Then falling, falling up on the sand
strewn over newly laid turtle eggs. (Bhatt, 2007, p.15)

The inability to sleep is a simple side effect of the pain and the cramps caused during menstruation. The poetic persona places the conch shell to her ear to hear the blood rushing; the reference brings focus to her constant consciousness about the blood flow. The metaphor of the sea, the formation of foam, the rising of water waves, the torn seaweed, and the turtle eggs are all references to the different stages of experiences of the menstrual cycle. This helps in the 'naturalization' of the process of menstruation as similar to any other processes of nature. Of course, one may not find such enthusiasm in the discourses of writers coming from the societies that still restrict and prohibit the movement or even an access to education of women.

One of the depictions of menarche by a male author, Narayan, in the novel *Kocharethi* can be thus seen. In the text the character of Parvati attains puberty which is depicted as a much awaited event by her mother. Parvati, appeared much more mature than her age. She had just passed class four. She had matured breasts and body, and was seen to be older than other girls owing to her bodily development. She hadn't menstruated. Many girls of

her age had withdrawn from school education owing to their, growth and maturity. But, Parvati continued to study. Her menarche is described in the text thus:

One afternoon Parvati called her mother from beneath the coffee tree near the house. That was unusual. There was an unfamiliar note in her daughter's voice...Kunjipennu felt herself shiver.

Kunjipennu ran out into the yard, followed by Madhavi. She saw blood stains on Parvati's clothes and let out a sigh of relief. She had been waiting for this for so long. Her daughter was a woman now. She recalled how she had stood behind a stone, a long time, bewildered, when this had happened to her—she did not have a mother to call out to.

She took her daughter behind the house, made her sit on the floor, and told Madhavi in a low voice: 'Mathi go quickly to Appan's house. Tell sister-in-law and others that Parvathi has menstruated.'

The skirt was changed. Kunjipennu gave her daughter a cloth to wear above and around it. She also placed a scythe in her hand. Parvati suddenly felt shy.

Paapi arrived with few other women. Kunjadichan erected a woven palm screen on the southern veranda. Raw turmeric was ground and its juice mixed with coconut oil. Paapi smeared this on Parvati's body...the women sat around and ululated. Parvati sat with a bowed head. (Narayan, 2012, p. 158)

In the Araya community that Parvati belongs to, the menarche is an occasion of celebration, along with a declaration of the attainment of womanhood. The ululation is a sign that a young girl has attained menarche, known as *therendu*^{xi} in the local dialect. Usually, Araya women are taken to the *eettappera*^{xii} once they start menstruating, but the absence of this in Parvati's case is alternated by letting her lie in a corner of the southern veranda behind a screen. The menarche marks a new ritual where the newly menstruating girl is supposed to part take in a symbolic marriage on the seventh day of the period. This is where, as per the custom, the cousin brother ties *kokkuri*^{xiii} to the newly pubescent girl. The text demonstrates a large celebration in the name of her menarche. She is smeared with oil, and given the menstrual bath with a lather of local medicinal plants. The following ritual then takes place:

Parvati's embarrassed and reluctant Muracherukkan Raghavan, stood on a rock and threw down areca nut and betel leaves—Parvati was supposed to pick up one of them. But Raghavan turned and ran off. Returning home Parvati wore new clothes and bowed before the lamp...Kunjadichan

handed the *kokkuri*--a half-inch-long piece of flattened gold strung on a black thread—to Paapi. As Parvati sat with bowed head, her face covered with her hands, Paapi tied the kokkuri. It was only according to custom that Parvati was Raghavan’s bride. It did not have to be that way. (Narayan, 2012, p. 159)

The ritual of the menarche – where the girl is treated like a new bride, with a whole lot of feasting and pomp and show declaring the maturity of the girl- is a common phenomenon in many communities of India as well as the world. (See Gogoi, Nitul Kumar, *Continuity and Change Among the Ahom*, 2006; Pati, Rabindra Nath, *Adolescent Girls*, 2004; Selvi, K. Tmail & Dr. S. Ramchandran, “Socio Cultural Taboos Concerning Menstruation: A Micro Level Study in the Cuddalore District of Tamil Nadu, India”, 2012; Das, S.T., *Life Style, Indian Tribes: Locational Practice*, Volume 3, 1989) The celebratory aspect of the menarcheal ceremony is not equivalent to the actual condition of the girl after the menarche. In most of these communities though the menarche in itself gives the scope for celebration, the monthly occurrence of menstruation in itself is seen as a taboo and thus a painful experience both for the girl and the community.

Such customs are also observed in Assamese culture. One of the narratives that depict these rituals is “Paas Sootalar Kathakata” (Narrative of the Backyard) by Arupa Patangia Kalita. The difference though is that in some communities the event is celebratory for both the community and the girl who attains puberty, but in the Assamese culture, the girl goes through many hardships owing to her menarche. The Assamese culture is engulfed by its customs and belief systems. The menarche is an extremely ritualistic event as Nizara Hazarika (2017), observes:

When a girl gets her first periods, she is put in a dark room, made to sleep on hay on the floor, and eat only fruits for the first three days. Then for the next few days, as per the advice by a priest, she is permitted to eat only one meal and not to see any man during that period. The exact time and date are noted and an astrologer is consulted who predicts many things about the girl’s future based on the time and alignment of the stars. She has to be purified after a period of Brat (ritualistic fasting), etc. The very physical experience comes alive socially and makes its presence felt in the cultural realm in the form of rituals as menarche, taboos, and restrictions throughout one’s menstrual life. What is noteworthy at this point is that there is unspoken politics in the discourse of menstruation, which is paradoxical, and rarely discussed. Where, on one hand the girl’s menarche is a cause for celebration, her monthly menstruation is seen to be a form of ritual impurity, that is considered evil; thus accords for the taboos and restrictions

that force her to be secluded for the period of her menstruation every month. (Hazarika, 2017)

The protagonist of the story, Majani, the young girl who attains puberty during the course of the narration, is encouraged by her mother Niru to challenge the customs forced upon girls at the time of menarche. The story shows a complete retaliation by Majani; she refuses to be purified by holy water, as she doesn't consider herself to be polluted and does not see menstruation as part of sin. She even retorts to her grandmother's pleadings that a women's destiny is full of tears and hardships. Majani breaks free from the various rituals created in order to ensure subjugation of women (Ibid.). The story attempts a de-tabooification of menstruation, by negating the menarcheal rituals that overtly express a sense of celebration, but is in fact a political agenda for ensuring female inferiority and submission in the society. This text brings forth a breaking free from the shackles of the celebratory garb of menarche present in the taboo ridden Assamese society. The girls as can be seen through various anthropological studies in Assam, are met with many hardships facing her menstruation. The author here attempts to bring hope to young reader who may actually experience the celebration of menarche by breaking free from the centuries of enforced norms and customs that are still the plight of majority Assamese women, who ironically belong to a community that reveres the Goddess of menstruation in the form of Kamakhya^{xiv}. Of course, there too, the goddess herself is considered impure for the three days that she is considered to be menstruating.

Where among the other narratives the experience of menarche is celebrated or recognized by rituals, and painful or celebratory personal experiences of the girls, Eliman's experience in the text, *The Moth-eaten Howdah of Tuskar* by Indira Goswami, is unlike any other. The most important fact is that instead of being an occasion for celebration, among the community; her menarche becomes her biggest life issue. The rules of the community loathe pre marriage menarche of a girl; Eliman is a victim of this very ritual at the time of her menarche. Her first period is one of secrecy, which is not to be celebrated but to be mourned and kept hidden. She is constantly questioned by people about her puberty: ““*Aichana*^{xv}, you look quite grown-up and a mature woman already. Your bosom is like a pair of doves swelling with eggs. Have your menses started?”” (Goswami, 2002, p. 494). Eliman's menarche has to be kept secret-between the old maid, Eliman and Indranath-throughout the narrative, Indranath continues to ponder the plight of a young girl who has just attained puberty and has to constantly worry about keeping it a secret. At the moment of menarche, the old maid, discusses the issue with Indranath, while, Eliman, has to hide away in the bushes shy and full of shame. Indranath constantly worries for the girl. Goswami's narrative depicts a sense of gloom, sadness and fear that is associated with the community when it comes to menarche, the experience of agony and pain is not just physical, and subjective, but also a cause for social interplay and

ostracization. This is a further extension of all those customs of the Assamese society that make menarche a bitter-sweet experience for the girl, never actually realizing the actual psychological effect it has on a young girl, who is oblivious to the day that marks her maturity and change in status as a woman in society.

From the above discussion it can be concluded that menarche represents two sides of a coin, in a girl's life; while certain social discourses bring her joy others bring her pain. The body as a biological entity is not as important as it is as a social entity. The issue of menarche is just a tip of the ice-berg in the menstrual discourse in India. Further investigations in various literatures can only bring out a clearer picture of the menstrual politics in India. Literature thus has a major role to play in creating a counter narrative that shall bring hope and optimism for the new readers who may start to empathize with the plight of every girl while she first starts to menstruate, while at the same time accepting it as a natural part of her life ahead.

Notes

ⁱ A group of Indian Hindu Castes residing in the state of Kerala.

ⁱⁱ Is one of the two major Sanskrit epics of India.

ⁱⁱⁱ The episode of the text *Mahabharat* where Draupadi is put out on a bet by her husbands during the game of dicing which lead to her disrobing in front of the court assembly as a consequence of the Pandavas losing their bet to the Kauravas.

^{iv} Term used to refer to father in Tamil.

^vTerm used to refer to grandfather in Tamil.

^{vi} Adjective form of the word Yoga, which is a school of Hindu philosophy advocating and prescribing a course of physical and mental disciplines for attaining liberation from the material world and union of the self with the supreme being or ultimate principle.

^{vii}In Yoga, the latent female energy believed to lie coiled at the base of the spine.

^{viii} A one stringed musical instrument used in the traditional music of South Asia and used in modern day music of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan.

^{ix} The sound that one hears after closing both ears and getting immersed in deep meditation.

^x In Indian yogic thought, each of the seven centers of spiritual power in the human body.

^{xi}Start to menstruate

^{xii}A shack

^{xiii}A half-inch-long piece of flattened gold strung on a black thread.

^{xiv} Tantric Hindu goddess of desire.

^{xv}Term used to refer to little daughter in Assamese.

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