

Period pieces



BOOK REVIEW

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When it comes to urban India, the topic of menstruation and menstrual hygiene receives a great deal of importance and attention. In fact, times are so advanced that many workplaces now ensure there is a steady supply of sanitary napkins in the women's restroom.

But what is it really like in the world parallel to the progressive urban one, where the concept of menstruation, a natural and healthy occurrence, is taboo and any

open discussion on it forbidden?

Human rights lawyer and writer Farah Ahamed's book, *Period Matters: Menstruation In South Asia* is a profound exploration of this topic. It documents essays, artwork, poetry, and personal stories by distinguished people from the world of politics, cinema, academics, and policymakers to revive this subject of taboo in both scope and significance.

One of the most powerful essays in the book that deserves mention at the outset is by Lahore-based academician Ayra Indrias Patras, who writes about a caregiver's perspective on managing menstrual hygiene. She interviews Fazilat (name changed in the book to protect identity), a mother and primary caregiver of her 14-year-old daughter who is autistic and has a speech impediment.

Fazilat, who cannot explain to her

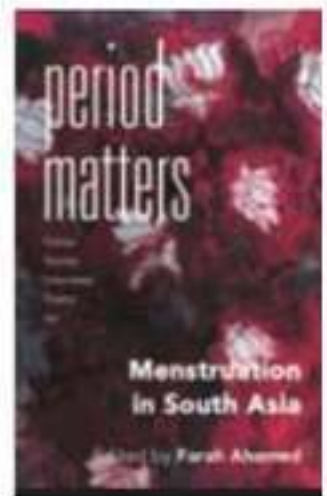
daughter why she bleeds every month, constantly reminds her to stay away from the male members of the family. In addition to managing her menstruation and menstrual hygiene herself, she fears her daughter's friendly and affectionate nature will lead men to take advantage of her sexually.

Ms Patras also delicately touches upon a common custom in Pakistan for cousins to marry. According to research, children born from these marriages run a high risk of genetic disorders. She explains how Pakistan is not an easy place to live if you have a disability and the lack of support and understanding from healthcare professionals—for people with disabilities and menstruation in general—only makes it worse.

Afghan student Mariam Siar's essay about coping with menstruation in Afghanistan reveals several studies by UNICEF that confirm the lack of knowledge and facilities. She adds how national spokespersons from the country's Ministry of Education feel that a

discussion on menstruation was “a step too far” and that there were no plans to introduce “taboo” elements in the school curriculum. The fall of the Afghanistan Islamic Republic on August 15, 2021, has only pushed this conversation further into the cave.

On the other side of the spectrum is Ms Ahamed's interview with Javed (name changed in the book to protect identity), a 32-year-old transgender man from Islamabad whose relationship with menstruation clashed with his identity. For the longest time, Javed lived in a state of dysphoria. He bled every month like a teenage girl while he identified as a teenage boy. His journey of self-acceptance began only when he turned 28 and underwent hormone replacement therapy.



The book is packed with many other essays: “Embracing Menopause at Thirty-seven” by actor Lisa Ray where she gets personal about her chemo-induced menopause; “Menstrual Matters” by eminent Indian writer Shashi Deshpande in which she recalls the time when

women had to wash their period cloth every day and how fathers’ behaviour changed towards their little girls when they grew up; Shashi Tharoor’s impressive essay on his introduction of the Menstrual Rights Bill in the Lok Sabha that

**Period Matters:
Menstruation in
South Asia**

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seeks to establish and legally protect menstrual rights for girls and women; and a Buddhist perspective on menstruation by Tashi Zangmo, founding director of the Bhutan Nuns Foundation, who compares menstrual

blood to the nectar of the lotus.

Two intense verses by poet Tishani Doshi — “I Carry My Uterus in a Small Suitcase” and “Advice for Pliny the Elder, Big Daddy of Mansplainers”— capture her relationship with her uterus and the big, bad world of mansplainers. A strong feature of the book is also the “menstrala” (art inspired by menstruation artwork) that showcases several bold and creative expressions such as Rupri Kaur’s photo essay from 2015 which took the internet by storm, reproductions of Anish Kapoor’s oil paintings and Amna Mawaz Khan’s choreography of her menstrual dance, among others.

For anyone who identifies as a woman, every menstruation story feels personal. The shame and the suffering of it. So many conversations, so much talk around periods and yet my neighbourhood chemist packs my sanitary pad in a brown paper bag. Here’s hoping Farah Ahamed’s revolutionary book can bring the pad out of the bag!