

Age at Menarche and Menopause Among Saharia Women –A Primitive Tribe of Madhya Pradesh

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ABSTRACT In the present paper, an attempt has been made to study the age at menarche and menopause of the women among Saharia – a primitive tribe of Madhya Pradesh. In women life, menarche and menopause are the significant and inevitable events which indicate a particular adult stage of first periodical flow of blood from womb and ceases to ovulate and menstruate respectively in all healthy women. As primitive tribe, Saharia are positioned under socio-economically backward condition. Mean age at menarche and menopause of women are varied in regarding the different background factors like – nutritional status, family size, medical facility, genetic factor, environment, education, birth rank, living standard, socio-economic condition, etc. In comparison with various studies, mean menarcheal and menopausal age of Saharia women have been found to be high (13.5 ± 0.84 years) and low 44.6 ± 1.17 years) respectively. Malnutrition, paucity of clinical facility, harsh environment, low socio-economic status, etc. may be assessed as the attributed reasons of high mean age at menarche as well as low mean age at menopause of Saharia women.

INTRODUCTION

Menarche is a biological term which was first introduced by Kisch in 1910. As a biological phenomenon, it gets expression in women's body which points out an important stage of life cycle. Menarche indicates the specific stage of first periodical regular flow of blood from womb in all the healthy normal females. At a particular level of biological developments, the girls begin to menstruate for the first time which is continued for a period of four to five days. The menstrual cycle is usually one of twenty eight days and the estimated blood loss is between 50ml. to 200 ml. (Barua, 1996). Menarche – the first menstruation, is a well defined milestone that denotes the functional development of the female reproductive system, although a few initial cycles are anovulatory. It is a clear indication of puberty and much of the adolescent growth spurt has already passed by the time of its onset (Prakash and Pathmanathan, 1992). It is not a final phenomenon of sexual maturation, but probably because of endocrine regulation is connected with other phenomena of puberty and growth processes including influence on adult body size (Wolanski et al., 1998).

With increasing age, various morphological and physiological changes are accompanied in women's life. The reproductive life of women ends with varying degree of suddenness with the menopause – a largely human phenomenon (Potts and Selman, 1979). In other words, menopause is considered as the most critical

biological event in the body and from this stage, the reproductive function of women is completely ceased by consequently arresting the menstruation flow of blood and ovulation (Sengupta and Rajkhowa, 1996; Kalita and Sengupta, 1997). Sometimes, the term 'menopause' is acquainted as the symbolic end of womanhood because the women who attained menopause are not capable for conception. However menopause is a very complex process of changes that occur in the biological structure of women, accompanied by a variety of events, sometimes resulting in extremely unpleasant symptoms which include hot flushes, headaches, insomnia and itching, etc. (Mastana, 1996).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Under Barai block in Gird subdivision of Gwalior district in Madhya Pradesh, 333 households of six Saharia villages have been covered for the present study. Barai is a multi-ethnic block where Saharia are inhabiting dominantly. Keeping in view of the distribution of Saharia in various areas, the Barai block was selected purposively. In the second stage of the study, the random sampling technique was applied for selecting adjoining close distance and far distance villages under this block. For face to face interact with the subjects canvassing an interview schedule was prepared to arrange the basic tools for data collection. Consisting of both open ended and close ended questions, this well planned interview schedule determined the

attitude, cooperativeness, speed of answering questions, answering performance, respondents' errors, socio-cultural barriers, acceptability, suitability, etc. of the respondents. Before finalizing the schedule, a pilot study was performed for pre-testing and checking up the initially prepared schedule and then necessary correction and modification were made keeping in view of the objectives of the study. The purpose of pre-testing the schedule was to rectify the errors and to incorporate the modification so as to make it more useful one. Literature survey, observation, case study, questionnaire, etc. methods were also used for collecting the relevant information. Assessing the manner of the respondents, confidential information in relating to menarche and menopause were collected from the women corroborating with the presence of their husbands or other closest ladies in own (Saharia) community. Age at menarche and menopause were carefully estimated by cross examining the statements of the women with her own age, present age, age at marriage, age at child birth, duration between menarche and menopause, important social events of the year, etc.

Saharia: A Primitive Tribe

Almost all over India, 623 tribal groups (including sub-groups) are preferably inhabiting the remote hilly and plain forest regions (Sachchidananda and Prasad, 1996). According to the Census, 1991 the total tribes comprise 8.08 percent out of total population. Among these tribal groups, 74 tribes have been categorized as primitive tribes for their small size of community, pre-agricultural stage of economy, high extent of isolation, low level of literacy, etc. (in Fifth Five Year Plan). Saharia is one among seven primitive tribal groups in Madhya Pradesh. In central India, Saharia primitive tribal groups are acquainted as the very widespread 'Kolarian' tribe (Thakur and Thakur, 1994). The early history of origination of Saharia are not exactly clear till now. Etymological point of view expresses that 'Saharia' is the combination of two independent words like 'Sa' (companion) and Haria (tiger) which mean companion of tiger (Tiwari, 1984). Legends describe that once upon a time, 'Lord Shiva' blessed them to have access to the jungle as like as 'Sher' meaning tiger or lion and from there, they were named as

'Saharia'. A lot of evidences in regarding Saharia are available in 'Vedic' literatures, 'Puranas', 'Aranyakanda' in Ramayana and 'Shantiparva' in Mahabgarat. Anthropological literatures support that Saharia are the 'Kolarian' (or Munda) tribe and they are totally depressed by successive wave of Hindu migrations. Later on in census report of 1981, this tribal groups have been identified as 'Aboriginal' and then categorized as primitive tribe in India.

Hamlet or 'Phalaya' is regarded as the first ecological unit in every dispersed Saharia village. To maintain their cultural homogeneity and save from extreme current of water specially in rainy season, they generally construct their rectangular type of huts on middle-top ground of the hill. Most of the Saharia are depended on ecology which plays an important role in forming their economic structure (Mandal, 1998). The post economic history of this tribal groups implies that they traditionally practise shifting cultivation, hunting, gathering, pastroalism and adopt nomadic life (Prabhu, 1983). But now-a-days, most of them have become daily wage earner, instead of cultivation (Singh, 1994). Bread is considered as the staple food of Saharia. But sometimes, due to unavailability of wheat, they consume roots, tubers, leaves, etc. which are collected from their nearest forest. They are very much addicted to drink local wine. Still now, the aged persons use 'Languta' (small piece of cloth) as their traditional dress. Women wear 'sharee' (ladies Dhoti), Ghagra (Peticot), Ordi (blouse), etc. Women are also very much interested to put on various ornaments. Plough, axe, spade, yoke, scythe, ladder, etc. are used as the implement for cultivation. Most of the Saharia inhabit in nuclear families. Saharia are strictly clan exogamous and tribal endogamous and also this study presents the existence of 21 clans. Saharia generally practise negotiation, early age at marriage and monogamy form of marriage. Junior Sororate marriage is allowed whereas divorce and remarriage are rarely practised among them. Traditionally, they conduct the child birth in a new hut and observe birth pollution during six days. After death, they cremate the dead body whereas in some cases, the dead body of old persons are buried. 'Behram, Thakur, Bhumij, Nahar Singh, Ghaloiya, Sitla Devi, Sardamai, etc. Gods and Goddesses are worshiped by them for various purposes. 'Saharma' -traditional political head and his

subordinates not only maintain their cultural homogeneity but also punish the offenders in their society. Their modern political organization only conduct the development activities in the area. Literacy rate of Saharia is very low (23.2 percent) whereas 28.2 percent and 17.7 percent are for male and female respectively (Biswas and Kapoor, 2003).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Age at Menarche: In women life, menarche is considered as an important physiological episode. The first menstruation start is taken into account as the age of puberty or maturity and from this stage, females are biologically capable to conceive. According to the Table 1, it has been observed that the age at menarche of Saharia women (respondents) varies from 12 years to 15 years. The maximum percentage of Saharia women menstruated at the age of 14 years (48.1 percent) and 13 years (38.7 percent) whereas only 7.5 percent and 5.7 percent women achieved menstruation cycle at the age of 12 years and 15 years respectively. Among all the women, the mean age at menarche has been found to be 13.5 ± 0.84 years.

Table: 1: Age at menarche of mothers among Saharia

<i>Age at Menarche (in Years)</i>	<i>Number of Mothers</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
12	25	7.5
13	129	38.7
14	160	48.1
15	19	5.7
Total	333	100.0

Mean \pm S.D. = 13.5 ± 0.84

Age at Menarche of Daughters: The various age of menarche of daughters have been reported in the Table 2. It has been observed that the maximum menarchial age of daughters varies from the age of 13 years (53.6 percent) to 14 years (33.9 percent). Menstruation cycle of 10.7 percent daughters was started at 12 years whereas very little percentage (1.8 percent) of daughters attained menstruation cycle at the age of 15 years. The mean age at menarche has been found to be 13.3 ± 0.66 years of daughters which is comparatively lower than their mothers (13.5 years) (Table1). The mean menarcheal age including mothers and daughters has been

measured as 13.4 years. It can be said that it is a secular trend for early sexual maturation.

Table 2: Age at menarche of daughters among Saharia

<i>Age at Menarche (in Years)</i>	<i>Number of Daughters</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
12	12	10.7
13	60	53.6
14	38	33.9
15	2	1.8
Total	112	100.0

Mean \pm S.D. = 13.3 ± 0.66

In the present study, it has been found that the mean age at menarche of women (respondents) and their daughters are 13.5 “0.84 years and 13.3 “0.66 years respectively which are moderate. Age at menarche of Saharia women (13.5 years) is high when compared to Gond (12.8 years), Kamar (13.49 years) but it is low when compared to Hill Korwa (13.67 years), Munda (14.65 years) and Abujhmara (15.0 years) tribes of Madhya Pradesh. It may be attributed that low level of socio-economic condition, malnutrition, paucity of health care facility, odd environment, etc. are the reasons for the present state of the menarcheal age of Saharia. Various studies indicate that menarcheal age is influenced by food habit, nutrition, occupation, education, family size, living condition birth rank, environmental, genetical, socio-economic factors, etc. (Bhasin, 1990; Singh and Shukla, 1992; Balgir, 1994; Patra, 2001; Biswas and Kapoor 2003).

Age at Menopause: According to the Table 3, it has been found that the maximum percentage of women come to menopause stage at the age of 44 years (34.4 percent) and 45 years (28.1 percent) whereas 18.7 percent, 9.4 percent and 9.4 percent women attained menopause at

Table 3: Age at menopause among Saharia

<i>Age at Menopause (in Years)</i>	<i>Number of Women</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
43	6	18.7
44	11	34.4
45	9	28.1
46	3	9.4
47	3	9.4
Total	32	100.0

Mean \pm S.D. = 44.6 ± 1.17

the age of 43 years, 46 years and 47 years respectively. The mean age at menopause has been found to be 44.6 ± 1.17 years. The mean reproductive span for the women has also been estimated as 31.1 years.

Mean age at menopause of Saharia women has been found to be 44.6 ± 1.17 years which is comparatively higher than the mean age at menopause of Kamar (43.0 years) but lower than Hill Korwa (44.63 years) tribes of Madhya Pradesh. The differences in age at menopause in different population or in different sub-groups of the same population may be influenced by genetical and environmental factors. Since the Saharia, like most of the Indian populations are strictly endogamous group, the contribution of genetical factors for any difference in menopausal age can not be ruled out. Malnutrition, low socio-economic factors, environmental and genetic factors, rural urban residence, family size, etc. may be attributed to the possible reasons for determining the menopausal age of women (Friseh, 1974; Bongaarts, 1980; Beall, 1983; Sengupta and Rajkhowa, 1996; Kalita and Sengupta, 1997; Majumdar, 2001; Biswas and Kapoor, 2003).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

With the changing occupational status from food gathering to food producing, Saharia are to have a slow onward progress in financial position. Government educational policy is also effected in their socio-cultural life. Slight decrease of menarcheal age of daughters from their mothers may possibly be explained as comparatively better nutritional status which is provided by their parents. Due to inhabit in small families and being educated, some of the parents are more conscious for care taking and providing balanced diet to their children and this influences lower age at menarche of daughters than elder cohorts. Marriage of women takes place a great role in reproductive performance. In respecting to their traditional socio-cultural orthodox, most of the Saharia girls of illiterate parents are to be married at very early age. Through marital alliance, the early menarcheal women generally participate in reproduction from early age and ultimately, they have longer reproductive span of life than those who get late menarche and also late married. So, in fine, it may be noted that the longer reproductive span of life and

reproductive behaviour of women are influenced by biological factor like - age at menarche and social status like - age at marriage respectively.

As an important biological parameter, menopause is also greatly responsible for designing the reproduction behaviour of women. It is defined as the striking event in the life of women which not only tends to overshadow all other aspects of life associated with reproductive decline but also marks the termination of reproductive cycle of women. In comparison with the available representation, the menopausal age of Saharia women has been found to be come down to some extent. The lower age at menopause of women may possibly be explained as the malnutrition, paucity of medical facility, harsh environment, low socio-economic status, etc. Taking into consideration of their undulating socio-economic status, it is urgently required to provide them the long-time multi-dimensional beneficiary programmes which will have an ample scope to progress their entire life style and then the flow of menopausal age of women may be expected in increasing.

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