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# Age at Menarche Among Scheduled Caste Girls of Punjab

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## INTRODUCTION

Menarcheal age is a fundamental parameter in the biological characterization of human populations. It also becomes an exact indicator of the quality of life that a population passes through in a fixed period of time (Prado et al., 1995). Menarcheal age varies from one population to another. A large number of investigations on age of onset of menarche have been carried out in many parts of India, but no serious attempt had so far been made to understand the trend of menarche among the Scheduled Caste girls of Punjab.

Scheduled Castes of Punjab cover a wide range of groups of population like Harijans who are either Sikhs or Hindus and the tribals who are no longer nomads. In the present study, both the Sikh and Hindu Harijan girls have been studied. Sikh Harijans are generally those Scheduled Caste people who are locally known as 'Majhabis'. These people claim Sikhism as their religion. Most of the males of this community work as agricultural labourers and industrial workers. Females of this community also work with their men-folk. These women also do other jobs like selling of vegetables and green grass, etc. Hindu Harijans form a significant part of the urban life which is dependent on them for cleanliness of their dwellings, streets and working places. Hereditary occupation of Hindu Harijans is sweeping and scavenging. Hindu Harijan men usually get employment in government offices, hospitals and other public places for taking care of cleanliness. Their females also work in the houses. For this, they are paid monthly remunerations. Pre-adolescent and adolescent girls of the Scheduled Caste community also share the manual work done by the elder females of the family.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

A sample of 1,000 Scheduled Caste girls (500 Sikh Harijans and 500 Hindu Harijans) between the age of 8-17 years was taken from the various government schools of Amritsar district of Punjab. The data were collected during the year 1996-97. The girls were taken into confidence. Using the status quo method, every girl was asked to state whether she had experienced menstruation. Those, who did not understand, were explained in detail and the answers in the form of 'Yes' or 'No' were recorded for every respondent. The dates of birth of the girls were recorded from the school registers which maintained fairly accurate records and were cross-checked from their parents. The median age at menarche has been computed through the probit analysis (Finney, 1962).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Frequency distribution of girls according to menarcheal status is set out in table 1. It is apparent from Table 1 that in the Sikh Harijan community, the youngest to experience menstruation was aged 8 years while the oldest one was 17 years. But among Hindu Harijan girls, the youngest to experience menarche was 9 years old. The probit analysis of the status quo data yielded median age of menarche for the Sikh and Hindu Harijans as 11.88±1.6 and 12.23±1.43 years, respectively. Thus, on the average, Sikh Harijan girls menstruate about 0.35 years earlier than the girls of Hindu Harijan community. The difference in the menarcheal age of Sikh and Hindu Harijans was statistically significant (t=3.31). Late occurrence of menarche among Hindu Harijan than Sikh Harijan girls may be due to their lower socio-economic status.

Scheduled caste girls of the present sample have been compared with other populations of Punjab. Menarcheal ages are almost comparable with the girls from other communities of Punjab. Scheduled Caste girls are ahead of Jat Sikh girls (13.05), Balmiki girls (13.23), Bania girls (12.88) and Punjabi girls (12.51). It is very important to note that Sikh Harijan and Hindu Harijan girls of Punjab have shown slightly lower menarcheal age as compared to all other communities of Punjab, but it is difficult to attribute this early menarcheal age to a particular cause. However, young girls of Scheduled Caste community live in typical

**Table 1: Total number and percentage of Sikh and Hindu Harijan girls who attained menarche and median age at menarche**

| *Age* | *Frequency* | *Cumulative frequency* | *Sikh Harijans percentage* | *Probit analysis* | *Frequency* | *Cumulative frequency* | *Hindu Harijans Percentage* | *Probit analysis* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 8 | 1 | 1 | 0.20 | 2.12 | – | – | – | – |
| 9 | 10 | 11 | 2.20 | 2.99 | 5 | 5 | 1.00 | 2.67 |
| 10 | 34 | 45 | 9.00 | 3.66 | 25 | 30 | 6.00 | 3.45 |
| 11 | 113 | 158 | 31.60 | 4.52 | 75 | 105 | 21.00 | 4.19 |
| 12 | 104 | 262 | 52.40 | 5.06 | 120 | 225 | 45.00 | 4.87 |
| 13 | 94 | 356 | 71.20 | 5.56 | 110 | 335 | 67.00 | 5.44 |
| 14 | 71 | 427 | 85.40 | 6.01 | 80 | 415 | 83.00 | 5.95 |
| 15 | 53 | 480 | 96.00 | 6.75 | 60 | 475 | 95.00 | 6.65 |
| 16 | 12 | 492 | 98.40 | 7.15 | 15 | 490 | 98.00 | 7.05 |
| 17 | 8 | 500 | 100.00 | – | 10 | 500 | 100.00 | – |
| Median age at menarche | | | 11.88±1.16 | | | | 12.23±1.43 | |

situations in the colonies around the city and are exposed to urban environment, as majority of them are engaged in the domestic work of the urban elites. Here, they get good diet, as it is customary in Punjab to provide food to the servant and her family, especially to the pre-adolescent girls as they are considered incarnation of "Vashnavi", the goddess. This dietary intake along with other genetical determinants of this population seems to be responsible for an early onset of menarche. There is still a need for clarification of the magnitudes of the influences of particular factors on menarcheal age (Henneberg and Louw, 1995).

**KEY WORDS** Menarche. Scheduled Caste Girls. Sikh Harijans. Hindu Harijans. Punjab.

**ABSTRACT** The purpose of the present investigation is to report median age at menarche among the Scheduled Caste population of Punjab. Cross-sectional data on 500 Sikh and 500 Hindu Harijan girls of Amritsar district of Punjab were collected during the year 1996-97. The information on age at menarche was obtained using status quo method. The probit analysis of the status quo data yielded median age at menarche as 11.88 and 12.23 years among Sikh and Hindu Harijan girls, respectively.

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