

“Let it flow!” Breaking taboos and stigmas about menstruation through ScarletScribe

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TEACHING CASES 2025

Introduction

Menstruation is simultaneously a taboo and a stigmatized topic in India and in many other parts of the world. For instance, menstruators (i.e. people who menstruate) in India are subjected to various cultural norms and religious restrictions such as not being allowed to partake in religious rituals, to enter religious institutions and kitchens, to draw water from wells, in addition to not being permitted to even touch plants, auspicious items, sour foods etc. In some Indian communities, women are even required to stay in separate menstrual huts during their periods. These and other similar negative connotations surrounding menstruation both directly and indirectly affect gender quality, reproductive and general health, access to education, opportunities for career development etc. for girls and women not only in India, but also worldwide (Werner et al., 2023).

In the Indian context in particular, the lack of education and awareness surrounding menstruation and menstrual health is an additional hurdle. Girls who get their first periods are often ignorant or misinformed about puberty and periods. It is not uncommon for girls experiencing menarche to worry that they might have contracted an illness, when encountered with menstrual blood for the first time (Krishnan, 2022). The parents and teachers are either uncomfortable discussing the topic or are ignorant about it, or are both. Any information on menstruation is usually thus passed down to girls from reluctant, uninformed mothers. Such information might also come from friends or relatives, who themselves are likely to be either misinformed or to possess outdated information. Even grownup women are thus not properly informed and are thereby unequipped to handle the painful cramps, premenstrual syndrome, heavy bleeding, and the other physiological and

psychological changes that accompany the menstrual cycle. This is the story of millions of menstruators in India, including the founder of ScarletScribe.¹

¹ScarletScribe is a pseudonym.

Company description

The stigmatization which surrounds menstruation is multilayered, as it has physical, tribal, and moral dimensions. This means that the menstruators are stigmatized due to the presence of blood and discharge as well as due to the alleged dirtiness associated with menstruation. Additionally, they are also stigmatized simply for being menstruating people (Goffman, 1963). This seal of ‘taintedness’ results in menstruators experiencing a sense of shame regarding the very normal biological process of monthly cycles. Furthermore, in countries such as India in which a significant portion of the population might not have access to health education, there is also the aforementioned lack of awareness surrounding periods.

Having experienced this sense of shame and lack of awareness herself, Lalita Sundaram discussed these menstrual challenges with her friend and (future) husband Peter Gill. Subsequently, Lalita and Peter identified the need for educating young people on menstruation and related topics (puberty, hygiene etc.). This eventually led to the creation of ScarletScribe, a for-profit organization which provides resources and services for helping people, mainly youngsters, learn about menstruation-related topics. ScarletScribe develops and launches products and services which directly address the stigmatization, proscription, and illiteracy surrounding menstruation. Thus, it puts the stigma and taboo surrounding menstruation, and potential solutions to these issues, front and center in its business model (Werner et al., 2023). The stigmatization and interdictions surrounding menstruation thus provides this social enterprise an opportunity to be a hybrid, innovative company.

ScarletScribe aims to change the social conventions about menstruation and menstruators (Werner et al., 2023) in India. The mission of ScarletScribe thus extends beyond the four

walls of the company and into the society. It is with this mission in mind that ScarletScribe experimented with, developed, and launched its first product - A comic book by the same name. To address a sensitive topic such as menstruation in an accessible manner, the company deemed the graphic narrative format of the comic book to be the most suitable option. The comic book discusses the facts about menstruation and puberty through four female characters - three friends named Ridhi, Maya, Smera as well as Pinki's elder cousin Tina, who is a doctor. The book is indeed an innovative yet simple and accessible product which helps to initiate open and active discussions of menstruation in India - a society in which individuals are extremely concerned about how their behaviors are presented to and recognized by others.

Like many other social enterprises, ScarletScribe also has faced funding issues. Initially, it ran as a self-funded venture for a year. The script for the comic book and the character designs were being developed during this period. Afterwards, the founders realized that it might not be feasible to run the enterprise solely based on self-funding. Therefore, in August 2013, they launched a crowd-funding campaign to raise funds for the development of the comic. This campaign was successfully completed in three months. Subsequently, ScarletScribe launched its pre-order option in July 2014. The comic book was printed and was ready to ship by December 2014, after one and half years in the making. The founders ensured that the first chapter of the comic book was accessible free of cost through the ScarletScribe website.

Subsequently, ScarletScribe released other printed and digital books including a puberty guide for boys, body safety guide for preschoolers, and self-development comics for children. These books, available in multiple Indian and foreign languages (English, Russian, Bulgarian, Gujarati, Marathi, Hindi, Bengali, Nepali, Spanish etc.), are available for shipping worldwide. With the help of a Spanish partner, who prepared an audiovisual resource and a trainer's guide to accompany the book and make it more suitable for Spanish-speaking audiences in Latin America, USA, and Europe (adapted from Fahs and Perianes, 2020), ScarletScribe ventured into launching the comic book outside India. Since then, the comic

book has also been adapted to suit the Australian audience, by Anjali Menon through her children’s health education company Aleena.

Through ScarletScribe, Lalita and her husband effectively contribute towards destigmatizing menstruation and redefining the (negative) symbolic meanings associated with it. Apart from the books, ScarletScribe offers certification programs, workshops, and master classes for facilitating the transformation of India into a period-positive society. To enable communications around the topic of menstruation, a Question & Answer forum and a blog are also maintained by ScarletScribe. The blog involves entries from more than 5000 members of different ages and genders. The Question & Answer forum acts as an online discussion site for people to hold conversations on menstruation and various other related topics in the form of posts and responses (Balachandran Nair, 2022). Through creating the forum and the blog, ScarletScribe has facilitated collective expression and open discussion, which are helpful in removing and reducing barriers surrounding periods-related conversations and in normalizing menstruation. As of 2024, the resources developed by Lalita and her team are being used in more than 30,000 schools in India and in over 11 countries. ScarletScribe has trained more than 15,000 educators and its work has influenced more than 15 million menstruators around the globe.

It is significant that ScarletScribe has managed to reach not only women and girls, but also men and boys. It is crucial for the male members of the society to understand menstruation and the inaccuracy of the perceptions surrounding it. Understanding the physiological and psychological aspects associated with menstruation will help the male members of the society to develop the sensitivity and capacity to support their female family members, friends, employees, and peers (Garg and Anand, 2015). As a matter of fact, it is promising to hear a 12-year old boy who has been educated about menstruation saying, “If there is no periods, there is no us”. ScarletScribe is to thank for this inspiring outlook amongst men and boys. The remarkable work of ScarletScribe hasn’t gone unnoticed. Quite deservedly, Lalita and ScarletScribe have been featured in outlets such as The Wall Street Journal, TED, India Forbes, Time, The Economic Times, BBC, Reuters, CNBC etc.

Market description

Indian society, while still being conservative about menstruation-related topics, is gaining positive momentum through dedicated programs on menstruation. For instance, May 28th is now observed as Menstrual Hygiene Management Day in India. Popular media has also started engaging in conversations around the topic. The advent of commercial films such as “Pad Man” and documentary films such as “Period. End of the sentence” are examples of this ongoing dialogue on menstruation. The latter film even won the Oscar in 2019 (Krishnan, 2022). Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) is also an integral part of the Government of India’s ‘Swachh Bharat Mission’ (Clean India Mission) campaign (Wankhede & Sivakami, 2023).

Despite these advances and other grassroots level initiatives at collective and individual levels (UNICEF India, 2023), social barriers still restrict the creation of a period-positive Indian society. In addition to the presence of such social barriers, another prominent feature of Indian society is its diversity. With over 100 languages, six major religions, and a multitude of states, classes, castes, ethnicities and cultures, it is futile for any company to treat India as a homogenous market. Discussing a sensitive topic such as menstruation in such a heterogenous market requires ScarletScribe to adopt a nuanced and multifaceted approach. The company has so far been successful in doing so.

First of all, considering the linguistic diversity, the products and programs of the ScarletScribe has been offered in different languages. ScarletScribe includes culturally relevant references and figures in the comic books. Simple stylistic decisions such as dressing some of the characters in salwar kameez (a traditional Indian attire) and featuring elaborate Indian meals at the dining table, help in ensuring that the target audiences can

relate to the characters. Similarly, the company features the endorsements of film stars, writers, philanthropists, international celebrities etc. on its website, to attract various audiences. The use of the online website, e-commerce platform, blog, and social media communities assure a broader reach amongst consumers in urban areas and amongst the younger populations. ScarletScribe’s work with schools, government bodies, and corporates increases its trustworthiness amongst individual customers. In addition, the affordability of the ScarletScribe products and services makes them attractive for the Indian market.

Managerial issues (+ tools + actors)

A major issue which ScarletScribe has faced was with respect to figuring out how to provide menstruation-related services and products in a culturally sensitive manner. Securing stable funding was another challenge. As discussed earlier in the case, the company was self-funded in the beginning. However, self-funding turned out to be not a long term solution. Acquiring funding from other sources was a challenging feat, as people assumed that a project which put menstruation front and center in its business model (Werner et al., 2023) will not be successful in India. The company also faced resistance from both urban and rural communities. Urban communities felt that they are already sufficiently informed about menstruation and hence do not need any new information on the topic. Contrarily, in the rural communities, ScarletScribe faced resistance due to the misbelief that sex-related education encourages promiscuity. Another challenge faced by ScarletScribe was the difficulty in ensuring that their materials are scientifically accurate and at the same time understandable and appealing for the target customers. Co-ordinating a diverse pool of stakeholders ranging from medical experts, governmental bodies, schools, non-governmental organizations, educators, and customers also required expertise.

Decision options (+ internal/external conditions affecting decision options)

Despite the aforementioned challenges, ScarletScribe has been successful in promoting period positivity and puberty awareness, both in urban and rural areas, amongst boys and girls, and by involving family members, educational institutions, and the society at large. The products and services provided by ScarletScribe are specifically developed in a culturally sensitive manner. For instance, the ScarletScribe comic book portrays body parts under clothes, in an unsexualized manner, rather than on bare bodies. Through interactions with different non-governmental organizations, parents, and school students, Ms. Sundaram has identified that the best time to educate girls about menstruation is when they are most likely to experience their first periods. By developing educational content in the form of comic books, the company has been able to impart information on menstruation in a comprehensible and interesting format to the girls in this age group. The information in the comic book has been reviewed by a physician and a gynecologist. The comic book format has been pilot tested with 500 girls, parents, and teachers who have all been impressed by it. Both digital and hard copies of the comic book are available, the latter so that the book is also accessible to target customers who do not have access to digital devices. Likewise, ScarletScribe provides resources for conducting menstrual awareness workshops in 13 languages, facilitating its impact on different areas of India and the world.

Regarding funding, ScarletScribe has been quick to realize that relying on self-funding is not a sustainable option. Thereafter, it has managed to raise funds through crowd-funding. ScarletScribe has been able to procure more funds than it had sought, thanks to many contributors who could relate to the issues surrounding menstruation either due to their

own experiences or due to the experiences of loved ones. The endorsements of people who knew of ScarletScribe has motivated more contributors to come forward. ScarletScribe also started collaborating with other companies in the feminine hygiene industry as evidenced, for instance, by the advertisements of a sanitary napkin company on its website. This might also be counted as another source of ScarletScribe’s income.

Tackling resistance from the urban and rural communities has not been that straightforward. In the rural areas, ScarletScribe has been making its presence known through workshops on menstruation. The workshops are organized by local non-profit organizations and schools. In this manner, the company has been tackling the resistance from rural areas slowly but steadily. The titular comic is featured in these workshops. While initially the participants were more amused than educated by the cartoons in the book, they slowly started understanding the concepts within the book and discussing them. The use of the comic in workshops also helped in publicizing the book even further through social networks.

Indeed, there is potential for ScarletScribe to scale up its contributions. For instance, to cater to the needs of the different strata of Indian market more effectively, ScarletScribe could vary the mode of delivery of the programs according to the specific demographic. This requires reflexive thinking from the ScarletScribe staff (Balachandran Nair, 2025). For instance, in rural communities, courses can be provided not only in schools, community centers, or workplaces, but also in the houses of community members. In several rural communities in India, women are often invisible, marginalized and silenced. Discussing a taboo topic such as menstruation in a public setting might be inconceivable to them. If the venue is one’s own home or the home of a friend or a community member, it will act as a safe and familiar space for these women to discuss their menstruation-related issues and experiences without any apprehensions.

Conducting market research and running pilot programs will ensure that the products and services provided are suitable for the specific strata of the Indian market that the company is interested in. Likewise, depending on the progressiveness or adaptability of the targeted

regions in India, the company can change the subtlety and directness of the campaigns. ScarletScribe can also join hands with other enterprises or campaigns which put menstruation front and center in their mission, such as the “Period charts” campaign which encourages women to track and display the dates and durations of their periods openly at their homes (Sandhu, 2022).

Conclusion

ScarletScribe has thus empowered menstruators to take control of their bodies and related biological processes, thereby shifting the meaning of menstruation from a curse or a hidden dirty secret to a normal occurrence which is to be understood and managed with confidence. ScarletScribe has succeeded in reaching individuals, schools, NGOs, governmental bodies, and companies in India. As their mission statement states, the ScarletScribe team is indeed making the process of teaching and learning about this “taboo” topic enjoyable, cheap, and comfortable. ScarletScribe’s impact is further evidenced by its long list of well-wishers, which include prominent female personalities such as authors, actresses, and philanthropists. In summary, ScarletScribe’ story is not only a case of successful entrepreneurship, but also a feat of remarkable social impact and prominence. Period.

Data section

This pseudonymized case study was inspired by existing organization(s) and was prepared solely using secondary data (aggregated from public websites, videos, and news channels).

The sources of the secondary data are listed below:

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