



Cartooning Away Period Shame

Aditi grew up feeling that having a period was shameful. So she and her creative partner, Tuhin, created a comic book to make it easier to talk about it.

Narration: This is Feeling My Flo, a podcast where we see menstruation as an event that happens to all types of bodies. I'm Kamilah Kashanie...my pronouns are she and her.

You're about to hear from two people in India who turned a school project into an international tool for period power. This is the making of Menstrupedia...a comic book all about periods with a sweet love story at its heart.

Menstrupedia is actually way more than a comic book. It's a website, where users can ask anything you want about periods. It's a blog where you can find articles about menstruation, and it's a popular YouTube channel.

The idea started when two friends wanted to help people think differently about periods.

Aditi Gupta: My name is Aditi Gupta, and I'm from Menstrupedia. The pronouns for me are she and her.

Narration: As part of Aditi's job, she visits cities throughout India and teaches people about periods. But as a kid, she wasn't as outspoken.

Aditi's from Jharkhand, a state in eastern India. Growing up, she remembers periods being treated like a secret.

Aditi: One thing that I knew about periods is that it is going to happen to me every month. And I did not know why do we get periods, and what is the biological process? In fact, I do not know the name of the opening, like, you know, vagina or urethra were not known to me. But I only knew that, you know, it is something that is going to happen to me throughout my life. And I have to keep it very secret and nobody should know.

Narration: In some regions of South Asia, menstruation is seen as taboo. Menstruators and non-menstruators alike are often discouraged from talking about it. A recent study revealed that 71% of young menstruators in India were surprised when they got their first period. That probably means no one had talked to them about it at all before it happened.

Aditi's As a child, Aditi remembers feeling that the people around her were hiding something when it came to periods. Even her mother, who was so supportive and caring during painful cycles, just told her to expect some blood on her underwear.

Aditi got her first period when she was twelve years old.

Aditi: I could hardly concentrate on anything else apart from just my body and my periods and how much pain and, and all those restrictions. Like you cannot touch this, you cannot touch that. So in India, most of the Indian household, we have a lot of myths and misconceptions.

Narration: The rules Aditi's talking about were pretty common in the Hindu community where she grew up twenty years ago. While on her period, she wasn't allowed to worship at her temple, touch certain foods, or rest on a family member's bed or sofa.

Aditi told us that, today, periods are kind of a cool thing to talk about. Movies and social media campaigns have helped create awareness around the injustices menstruators face. For example, the hashtag #HappytoBleed was started by college student Nikita Azad to protest menstruators being banned from a popular temple in Kerala, India.

The rules and restrictions around menstruation made it challenging for Aditi to have access to the supplies she needed. In fact, she used reusable cloth during the first three years of her period.

Aditi: My parents are so cool, and they have taken so much care of me. But when it came to periods, there was so much of secrecy. And uh, they have provided me with the best of the facilities they can. In fact, sometimes more than what they could afford. But when it came to sanitary napkin, I did not have access. Not because we couldn't afford it, but because, uh, the question was who would go and buy it.

Narration: When washed and dried properly, cloth can be an eco-friendly, money-saving way to manage periods. But repeat washing made the cloth kind of rough over time, which led to Aditi getting rashes and infections from using them.

Aditi: Using cloth is not a problem, but the way we handle it, you know, like we have to hide it and then dry it. Or when we have to store the dry cloths to be used for next cycle or for next day. Uh, there was so much of secrecy around it, which...which just made it very, very difficult.

Narration: It wasn't until Aditi was 24 that she finally felt comfortable opening up to someone about her period. A very special someone.

Tuhin Paul: I am Tuhin Paul, I am one of the founding members of Menstrupedia and my pronouns would be him, his.

Narration: That's Tuhin. As a kid, he knew he wanted to be an artist.

Tuhin: I have been drawing as a hobby from a very young age. So I used to draw all these different Disney characters, uh, at a very young age, Donald Duck, Mickey Mouse and all of that.

Narration: Aditi and Tuhin were classmates in art school.

They started working on class assignments together. Over time, Aditi and Tuhin grew to trust and respect one another's ideas.

And eventually, Tuhin proposed.

Tuhin: I told her that, I need to know if you would be interested in spending the rest of your life with me. And, uh, and I told her that if you are interested then rest everything can be figured out.

Narration: Tuhin started to notice there were some days when Aditi wasn't feeling as chirpy or energetic as usual.

Aditi: Tuhin and I, we used to do a lot of projects together. And that is how we fell in love, so I was comfortable talking to him about periods. And because I was comfortable, I had shared with him that, you know, there is this process called periods and a girl has to go through it every month. So I get abdominal pain, uh, during my periods, I get severe menstrual cramps. And, uh, then I told him about the restrictions and then he freaked out.

Narration: Tuhin was shocked. Mostly because of how little he knew about menstruation. He'd grown up with two brothers.

Aditi: His mother kept this phenomena such a secret that he did not know that girls bleed every month.

Narration: Together, Aditi and Tuhin turned to the Internet for more information.

Tuhin: And then we thought that it's probably as important as the other systems that are there in our body, like respiratory system and digestive system. Especially in case of girls and women, since it happens every month. This is definitely something that girls and women should be aware about. So yeah, so that is how that curiosity led to more discussions and more details on this topic.

Narration: The two started thinking back to when they were kids. Aditi remembered how secretive periods were, and how ashamed people were to talk about them. One thing they both noticed was that non-menstruators — many of them young cisgender men — were being

kept out of the conversation altogether.

So they decided to make a change.

Aditi: That affirmation was very strong in us that this is something that, that is our calling. This is something that we can really, really change. But we wanted to do something for a nine-year-old me and Tuhin, you know?

Narration: They wanted to create something helpful that would get rid of the sense of shame around periods. They wanted young people to learn about menstruation in a fun way.

Aditi and Tuhin decided to do a school project on menstruation. As a first step, Aditi talked to parents, teachers, and young menstruators.

During some of these conversations, she learned more about rules and restrictions. In some cases, menstruators had to eat and wash their dishes separately or avoid taking baths during their periods.

But she also realized that parents and teachers did want to talk to their kids about menstruation. They were just either too embarrassed or didn't know where to get the right information.

Aditi: The, you know, uh, insight that we got from our research was that menstrual unawareness and when it comes to taboo, not only periods, but when it has to come to childbirth, sex, intercourse, contraception, it has nothing to do with how educated or how rich you are.

Narration: Aditi and Tuhin started sketching out their ideas...and after hours and hours of work...they came up with Menstrupedia.

It's a comic book with four characters — Pinki, Jiya, Mira, and Priya Didi — asking questions and getting answers about menstruation.

Aditi: Uh, my favorite character is Priya Didi. Priya Didi is a doctor. Uh, why we kept her as a doctor because any information that is coming from a doctor, um, you know, it fits with the mental model of humans because they will trust her.

Narration: Didi means older sister in Hindi. Aditi and Tuhin modeled the characters like the readers they wanted to reach. They believed that if readers could see themselves on the page, it would reduce the sense of shame and confusion around periods.

After six months, Aditi and Tuhin felt ready to share the Menstrupedia comic book with a test audience. And something beautiful started to happen.

Aditi: During our user testing, we could see that girls were opening the book and reading in front of their fathers, and this is what we wanted to achieve. We wanted to, uh, have the conversation, the family should have the conversation together on

periods and then only we can break the taboo. And, uh, it worked really well. And comic is one of the medium that could achieve it.

Narration: As of March 2020, Menstrupedia has sold over one million copies. It's been translated into eighteen different languages, including Bengali, English, Persian, Russian, and Spanish. Aditi and Tuhin have also developed a training program called Hello Periods that's used in over 7,000 schools across India.

Aditi and Tuhin are two people who believe education is key to getting rid of period misinformation and untruths. Together, they're inspiring a new generation of people who are empowered, well-informed, and unafraid of periods.

Narration: Feeling My Flo wants to help you start important conversations at critical moments...like when you want to tackle the taboos in your life.

You can check out the Menstrupedia comic at Menstrupedia.com.

Feeling My Flo is a production of Lantigua Williams & Co. We're here to inform, entertain, and empower. Ask your parents or an adult if you can visit us at feelingmyflo.com or connect with us on social media. We're at [flo_pod on Twitter](#) and we're [feelingmyflo on Instagram](#).

This episode was co-produced by Stephanie Rodriguez and Mia Warren. She's our executive producer. It was mixed by Kojin Tashiro. Our lead producer is Cedric Wilson. I'm Kamilah Kashanie.

CITATION

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