

[Celebrating Auspiciousness](#)

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Rites of Passage To Womanhood in Traditional Village Culture

Vendantham, T.R. Seclusion of women during menses has been the case in most of the Hindu families in India. There have been marginal differences in the custom in different parts of the country. What is given below is the pattern in the southern districts of India. If we are to have a correct perspective of the customs and the practices prevalent, however, it should be understood that Hinduism does not look upon the phenomenon of sex as vulgarity, obscenity or sin. And in the customs and practices prevalent you also find a judicious dose of what one might call sex education.

The attainment of maturity by a girl, marked by the first menses, is considered as an auspicious event. At the first sign of the first menses, the girl is segregated and put in a separate small house. In a village community there is always some house which is not occupied at the moment and which can be used for the purpose. (In some villages there is a permanent arrangement, and all women in the neighborhood go there and stay for four days during their monthly periods). Once the girl has been installed in the house or apartment, an invitation goes 'round to all the young girls in the neighborhood to come and stay in the apartment and keep company with her. The invitees are all girls between the age of 9 and 14 years. Most of them, therefore, have not attained puberty. A young woman is then detailed to carry out a program of training for the chief guest and the other girls. She gives a demonstration and a lecture as to what menstruation means and how it is to be dealt with. The girls who are on the waiting list now know what they can expect in the months ahead. They are also told about the symptoms that precede the onset of menses, e.g. development of the breasts, flushing of the face, a feeling of congestion in the lower abdomen, progressive increase in appetite, etc. This period of probation lasts normally for four days. The invitees who came to keep company are entertained with a feast on the fifth day, and the assembly is disbanded. The elder lady of the house wishes the young ladies the happy augury of maturity and puberty each in their own proper time. All fear complexes and excitement are thus removed from their minds. They know that this is something normal and nothing to worry about.

At the feat the girl is dressed in a new saree and decked with flowers, and the usual prayers are said. This is followed by two rituals that are interesting. The first is called Etti Irakku, which means "lift up and lower down." A cylindrical measure used for measuring grain is filled with rice paddy seeds. A small earthen oil lamp is placed on top of it and lighted. The women assembled for the function then come one after the other and take this seed-light and raise it from the ground to a height of 5 feet and then lower it back to the ground while standing in front of the girl. This is done three times, just like swinging incense before an altar. Then they sing songs of prayer and congratulations to the girl for her enjoyment and happiness in life. The elderly women give their blessings for a loving husband and beautiful children. This is followed by distribution of sweets and milk to the guests.

In the evening there is another function of short duration. The girl sits in the open space of the courtyard. A stone pestle, as used for grinding in the kitchen, is placed on her lap, and a cup of milk is poured by the women on the end of the pestle. Then everyone showers flower petals on the girl, shouting "Male, male, male." The ritual is interpreted in two ways. First, as a prayer that the girl be blessed with a male child as her first-born. It is also interpreted as if the pestle is a phallus symbol and the means or tool for motherhood. In the previous ritual of the paddy seed and the lamp, the seeds represent reproduction and progeny. The lamp represents mother's love.

During the four days of segregation the assembled girls regale themselves and the passersby with songs and jokes, often lewd and somewhat vulgar. No one takes it ill. But this license is cancelled as soon as the celebrations are over. During the first half of this century the educated elitist classes developed a prudish attitude and felt the whole performance a bit of a vulgar show. Meanwhile urbanization started, and crowded towns and cities started coming up. This was due to the impact of Western civilization and the changed outlook. Result: this practice started falling into disuse, the city dwellers gave it up, as total segregation became more and more difficult. But in remote villages where a hundred or more families live together as a community, it is still in vogue in abridged form.