

Age at Menopause and Health at Midlife: An Urban Indian Experience

***Ms. Purabi Pathak Das & **Prof. Amrita Bagga**

Key words: *Age at Menopause, Symptoms, Anthropology*

INTRODUCTION: According to the 2001 census, in India there were 54 million women who are above the age 50 years, and this number is going to increase drastically in the forthcoming years. A total of 130 million Indian women are expected to live beyond the menopause into old age by 2015. Menopause is the signal indicating the approach of the third phase of life, just as the beginning of the menstrual cycle indicates that a woman is entering the second or the fertile phase of womanhood, from childhood. Every woman who reaches fifty must pass through this period of life. However, multiple health issues that emerge during this phase of life demand basic understanding of the underlying mechanisms of reproductive ageing. The dread of menopause starts with the symptoms of unprovoked irritability, loss of attractiveness of body and then to the fears of postmenopausal health risks such as cardio-vascular diseases, bone softening/fracture or cancers related to breast, uterus or cervix. Added to that, the long period of menopause/ peri-menopause/ post menopause brings a lot of unavoidable gloom, misery and helplessness to most of the women in the midlife.

Menopause occurs at a median age of 51.4 years, with some women reaching menopause as early as their 30s, and a few in their 60s. Menopause which commences prior to the age of 40 may be defined as “**premature menopause**”. Having premature menopause puts a woman at more risk for osteoporosis and other hormone-deficiency related diseases later in her life. It may also be a source of great distress, since many women younger than 40 still want to have children.

OBJECTIVE: The current study has been conducted in one of the North eastern state of India, Assam, which from the previous studies shows very low age at menopause across various populations, even lesser than the country average. Moreover, the people of Assam composed of many ethnic and racial groups. While many of the caste groups’ exhibits resemblance of genetic and physical characteristics with the main stream of Indian caste groups, many tribal groups belong to the Mongolian racial type.

The purpose of the present study is:

1. To explore the variations in age at menopause among urban women of different ethnic and racial backgrounds;

2. To investigate various symptoms of menopause in the study are;
3. And to find out impact of early menopause on general health during this transition period of life among women in India.

DESIGN: Data for the current investigation was collected with the help of a primary survey from 180 respondents among Assamese urban population. The sources of information were the women aged between 40-55 years along with a few cases, whose age is less than 40 years, yet have attained menopause, and/or exhibit characteristic symptoms of menopause, and/or have skipped menses in the last few months, and are captured through snowballing technique to retain more cases of premature menopause.

All respondents belong to urban background, and majority of them belong to middle to higher socio-economic status. Homogeneity in terms of economic background was purposively retained to check the effect of possible factors in variation in age at menopause. In this exercise women who have attained menopause at the age 44 years and before have been considered to have early menopause and further analysis have been done to find out the possible contributors towards variation in age at menopause.

FINDINGS: The following are the main findings of the current exercise:

- Among the randomly selected menopausal women, 11.1 had attained premature menopause (<40 years), 34.4 per cent had attained early menopause (40-44years), 38.9 per cent attained menopause within the age 44-49 years and 15.6 per cent had late onset of menopause (Table-2).
- **Mean recall age at menopause** have been found to be **44.77 years**. Mean recall age at natural menopause have been found to be **45.60 years**. The highest frequencies of age at menopause are shown at the ages between 43-45 years.
- Incidence of surgical or artificial menopause (26.6%) is found to be quite high among the women under study. Among all the respondents 73.3 per cent had natural menopause, and as high as 23.3 per cent had hysterectomy and 3.3 per cent of them had oophorectomy and other process. What more important is that only 34.9 per cent women who had early menopause (<45 years) attained menopause naturally against 65.2 per cent among those who attained menopause at an age more than 45 years (Table-2). This fact reveals that higher the age more is the chances of having smooth and natural transition through this event of life, while early menopause also can be associated with hazardous processes like

hysterectomy and other medical procedures. It is worth mentioning here that hysterectomy in the present study is more frequently indicated by heavy bleeding, prolonged bleeding and presence of some tumor or cancer in the uterus.

- Women belonging to the SC/ST/OBC (Scheduled tribe/Scheduled caste/Other backward class together) have more tendency to attain menopause at an early age (60.7%) than the Non SC/ST/OBC category (40.6%). (Table-3).
- This study also suggests that higher percentage of women who attained early menarche (less than age 12) have attained early menopause (59.3%) than those who have attained menarche at the age 12 years and above (41.5%). The current study also reveals that higher the parity higher is the age at menopause; 51.9 per cent women attained early menopause among women who had less than and equal to 2 children against 40 per cent among those who have 3 and more children (Table-3).
- Menopause has been found to be inversely correlated to occupation of women with the evidence of early menopause only among 30.0 per cent working women than among 54.8 per cent non-working women. Even though in the present study the number of illiterate women are very less, the effect of education on age at menopause is clearly visible with more number of women who are illiterate have attained early menopause than those who are literate and have some level of education. (Table-3).
- Although, substance abuse among the women of Assam is generally limited to chewing of beetle nut with beetle leaf and sometimes mixed with *sun* (calcium carbonate), tobacco and *paan masalas*, incidence of early menopause is higher (54 per cent) among those who consume these than those who don't consume any such substance (38 per cent).
- Joint and muscular pain is the most commonly reported symptom (57.2%) of the present study, with Physical and mental exhaustion scoring the 2nd position (55.0%) (Table-4). One of the most commonly reported symptoms during the climacterics (perimenopause) worldwide, has been found to be 3rd most frequently reported symptom (41.1%) in the present analysis, followed by heart discomfort, sleep discomfort, sexual problems, and depressive mood.
- Hot flushes are equally reported by women who had early menopause and those who had it after 45 years of age (Table-4). More women among those who had attained early

menopause reported sleep problems, depressive mood, dryness of vagina, etc. while women who had menopause after the age 45 years reports heart discomfort, physical and mental exhaustion, joint and muscle pain much more frequently than their early menopausal counterpart. This is probably because those who have attained delayed menopause, most commonly had natural menopause and natural menopause poses only the risks of suffering from ailments arising out of degenerative and hormonal deficiency. These deficiencies can cause problems such as physical and mental exhaustion and joint and muscle pain, which however are gradual and smoother than the problems suffered by those who attain menopause at an early age. Women attaining menopause at an early age along with problems of sudden hormonal changes in their body also pose threat of suffering from psychological distress (depressive mood 41.9%) and fear of physical disabilities and diseases at an early age.

- Most importantly, women who had surgical or artificial menopause are found to have suffered from most of the listed menopausal symptoms; much more than those who had natural menopause suggesting that the sudden changes arising from the surgical procedures are hard-hitting on the health of the women added with the problems suffered during the surgery and post-surgery bed-rest. Whereas, natural menopause, process and hence the changes are also smooth as far as the transition is concerned.

CONCLUSION: From the current exercise it is evident that age at menopause is relatively low among the urban women of Assam and the main factor contributing to this low age at menopause were found to be the higher rate of artificial and surgically induced menopauses. Age at menopause was found to be low among the SC/ST/OBC, lower menarche, lower parity, have no occupation and substance abuse. Higher percentage of women who had late age at menopause had natural menopause while early menopause was more frequently associated with surgical procedures and brought sudden changes to life of women and were reported to suffer from more psychological distress (depression) along with sleep discomfort and dryness of vagina. Hot flush was reported equally by both groups of women. The most commonly reported menopausal symptoms by the women who attained menopause at a later age were joint and muscular pain, Physical and mental exhaustion and heart discomfort. There is a large variation in the combination in which the symptoms of menopause occur and degree of discomfort they make to the women. Most of the times women don't even realize and consider these symptoms as menopausal. Hence, it is important to understand these details and the challenge in front of the social and biological researcher is to eliminate its mystery and misconceptions so that women can be made better prepared to handle the transition in their later life.

APPENDIX

Table 1: Age-wise distribution of women according to their current menopausal status

Age groups	Current Menopausal status			
	Pre-menopausal	Peri-menopausal	Post-menopausal	Total
< 40 years	9.3	12.8	2.2	6.4
40-44 years	58.1	48.7	8.9	30.2
45-49 years	25.6	30.8	26.7	27.3
50 yrs & above	7.0	7.7	62.2	36.0
Total no.	43	39	90	172

Respondents selected only through random selection.

Table 2: Distribution of all menopausal women according to their age at menopause and menopausal age by process of menopause.

Age at Menopause	Percentage of women	Process of menopause	
		Natural	Surgical/ artificial
< 40 years	11.1	7.6	20.8
40-44 years	34.4	27.3	54.2
45-49 years	38.9	45.5	20.8
50 yrs & above	15.6	19.7	4.2
Total no.	90	66	24

Table 3: Age at menopause according to various characteristics of the respondents

Characteristics of the respondents	<= 44 years	>= 45 years	Total no
Caste/tribe			
SC/ST/OBC	60.7	39.3	28
General	40.6	59.4	64
Age at menarche			
Less than and equal to 11 years	59.3	40.7	27
More than and equal to 12 years	41.5	58.5	65
Total number of children ever born/parity			
Less than and equal to 2	51.9	48.1	52
More than and equal to 3	40.0	60.0	40
Currently working			
Yes	30.0	70.0	30
No	54.8	45.2	62
Ever worked in lifetime			
Yes	39.0	61.0	41
No	52.9	47.1	51
Educational attainment of the respondents			
Illiterate	75.0	25.0	4
Up to matriculate level (<=10 th standard)	44.1	55.9	34
Above matriculation (11 th standard+)	46.3	53.7	54
Ever consumed_Tobacco products			
Yes	52.1	47.9	48
No	38.1	61.9	42
Total % and no. of respondents	46.7 (43)	53.3 (49)	100.0 (92)

Table 4: Distribution of menopausal symptoms according to menopausal status, age at menopause and process of attaining menopause.

Symptoms suffered	Menopausal status of the respondents			Total no.	Age at menopause		Process of menopause		Total no.
	Pre-meno pausal	Peri-meno pausal	Post-meno pausal		>=44 years	>=45 years	Natural	Surgical/artificial	
Hot flushes/ Sweating	9.3	37.8	57.6	74	58.1	57.1	53.7	68.0	53
Heart discomfort	11.6	35.6	47.8	65	44.2	51.0	46.3	52.0	44
Sleep discomfort	9.3	31.1	42.4	57	46.5	38.8	41.8	44.0	39
Depressive mood	9.3	42.2	41.3	61	41.9	38.8	37.3	48.0	37
Irritability	16.3	20.0	41.3	54	41.9	40.8	41.8	40.0	38
Anxiety	14.0	31.1	32.6	50	32.6	32.7	32.8	32.0	30
Sexual problems	18.6	33.3	39.1	69	37.2	40.8	40.3	36.0	36
Physical & mental exhaustion	34.9	57.8	63.0	99	53.5	71.4	62.7	64.0	58
Bladder problems	16.3	15.6	30.4	42	32.6	28.6	28.4	36.0	28
Dryness of vagina	9.3	22.2	31	45	41.9	26.5	29.9	44.0	31
Joint & muscle discomfort	34.9	62.2	65.2	103	58.1	71.4	61.2	76.0	60
Total respondents	43	45	92	180	43	49	67	25	92

- (Values in the cells represents those who said 'yes' from the total in each category. Reporting of each symptom is mutually exclusive)

*Research Scholar, Dept. of Anthropology, University of Pune, Pune, INDIA

Postal Add: Senior Research Officer, Global Adult Tobacco Survey (GATS-India)
International Institute for Population Sciences, Govandi Station Road, Deonar, Mumbai – 400 088, India
Phone: +919987592870/ +919987015639
e-mail: purabi_pathak@yahoo.com; pakhi77@yahoo.com

**Former Prof. & Chair, Dept. of Anthropology, University of Pune, Pune, INDIA

Postal Address:
10, Winchester House,
Salisbury Park, Pune-411037, INDIA.
Phone: +91 20 24269824; Mobile: 98904 63130.

eness@vsnl.com; amritaraunakk@yahoo.co.in