

Economic Empowerment and Women of Orissa

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Women occupy an important position in any society. The development of status of women is considered as an important condition of social development. This condition varies from country to country, State to State and region to region depending upon their culture, power of adoption of modern changes and education. The past three decades have witnessed a steadily increasing awareness of the need to empower women through measures to increase social, economic and political quality and broader access to fundamental rights. Along with sub-ordinate status of women; has come the concept of gender as an overreaching socio-cultural variable, seen in relative to other factors, such as race, class, age and ethnicity.(WEF 2007)

Empowerment of women refers to the spiritual, political, social and economic strength in communities. It often involves the empowered developing confidence in their capacities. It includes decision making power of their own, access to information and resources for taking proper decision, to exercise assertiveness in collective decision-making and involvement in the growth process. Empowerment of women could be only achieved if their economic and social status is improved. Swami Vivekananda had said, "That country and the nation which does not respect women will neither become great now

and nor even in future and in pursuit of making India a great nation, let us work towards giving women their much deserved status." In this context five important dimensions are important, they are, economic participation, economic opportunity, health and well being, political empowerment and educational empowerment. The economic participation is important because presence of women in the workforce in quantitative terms is important not only for lowering the disproportionate levels of poverty among women but also as an important step forward raising household income and encouraging economic development of the country.

In past; service sector was not much developed, so mostly women were engaged in agricultural sector, but nobody paid attention to their contributions. Our women are also active in other fields. Going deep into history of Orissa, through the articles of historians, we can get information of these great ladies of substance. The history of Orissa shows that from the middle of 6th century AD to 8th century AD, the women were excelling in culture and arts. Even the women during the Sailodbhava dynasty ruled over southern part of Orissa (Patel A.M.2009). Royal women of these times were benevolent and could donate villages but did not play an active role in

affairs of administration (Patel A.M. 2009). During 736 AD to 945 AD during the rule of Bhaumakars, women enjoyed good position and power. The Bhaumakars follow the custom of allowing their female members to succeed their deceased husbands. Six widowed queens and one unmarried princess of the Bhaumakar dynasty ruled as sovereign rulers which is unprecedented in Indian history. Even during 1038 to 1435 AD women commanded respect and had finance and social status. Sarala Das's Mahabharat in 15th century AD showed that, dowry payment, male child preference all were there in the society. Despite all these some women such as Sumitra Devi of Mayurbhanj ruled from 1803 AD to 1810 AD. Similarly Rani Sukadei of Banki showed her intelligence (Patel A.M. 2009).

In mid 1800 the British effort tried to prevent child marriage, permit widow re-marriage etc. Social forums on child marriage prohibition etc. were established in Cuttack and elsewhere. Post independent Orissa did not see many women in public life. Politically their impact on government is too early to be assessed, but the potential is great and it demands a conducive atmosphere. But coming to ordinary women, economically and socially, there has not been much transformation since the last 50 years. The first condition to be empowered is education, because that opens our eyes to other fields. The Census report 2001 says the sex ratio in Orissa is 972:1000, and the female literacy rate is 50.51 percent where as male literacy rate is 75.35 per cent. The total literacy rate is 63.8 per cent. Education plays an important role in getting, understanding and following various information. It helps in creation of awareness. But both literate and illiterate women can also have economic empowerment. One such area is engagement in Self Help Groups (SHG) through microfinance. In creating the

concept of micro loans, Muhammad Yunus changed the lives of Bangladesh and earned himself a Nobel prize. SHG based microfinance programme in Orissa started since the early 1992 with the initiatives and refinance facility provided by NABARD. With the formation of SGSY in 1999 and launch of Mission Shakti, the bank linkage shows a significant growth. The mission is to uplift women of Orissa economically.

Mission Shakti was launched on the occasion of International Women's Day on 8 March 2001 by Hon'ble Chief Minister of Orissa. The mission aims at empowering women through formation and promotion of one lakh women's self help groups (SHG) over a period of four year i.e. 2001-05 and strengthening the existing ones. A tie up has been arranged between Orissa Khadi and Village Industries Board and Orissa Khadi and Village Commission for involvement of WSHGs (Women Self Help Groups) in Rojgar Yojana (Sahoo 2004). With the help of department of Horticulture, banana cultivation by SHGs is being encouraged. Steps have been taken for providing Gram Panchayat tank to women's SHGs on priority basis for taking up pisciculture. In collaboration with UNDP it has been decided to impart computer literacy to WSHGs in 38 IT kiosks in the State. Exhibition of goods produced by SHGs is being organized with the help of ORMAS and KVIC in different districts of State. Project "Shakti Gaon" has been introduced in the State, engaging SHGs in distribution of LPG cylinders (Sahoo 2004). Women SHGs are taking up varieties of income generation activities such as piggery, goatery, pisciculture, dairy, setting up at PDS outlet, kerosene dealership, vegetable cultivation, floriculture, khadi, stitching, bee keeping, rope making etc.

The objective of Mission Shakti is to facilitate for creation of conducive environment through self-help act, to strengthen the quality of the existing SHGs in Orissa, to provide institutional capacity building support to strengthen the SHG. It also helps in identifying an area as nodal agency, responsible for overall SHG strengthening. It also aims at to expand and development of the quality of self help movement in the State.

In Orissa; women are employed in large numbers, as non-workers in the agricultural sector and their contribution to the household income continues to be ignored. Industrially, over all State is undeveloped, so there is less scope for job opportunity for women of Orissa. But Mission Shakti's mission through SHG is now a vital weapon to fight against rural poverty. The introduction of SHG concept and its implementation is a mechanism to empower poor masses and particularly women of Orissa. The progress of SHG is remarkable both from the point of view of numbers formed and bank-credit linkage established. So in this situation Mission Shakti is a ray of hope. It is certainly working for

the future and development of the status of women in our State. It leads the path towards economic empowerment of women in Orissa.

References:

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Hon'ble Chief Minister Shri Naveen Patnaik inaugurating Extension Block of Orthopedics Department at SCB Medical College, Cuttack on 27.2.2011. Shri Prasanna Acharya, Minister for Health & Family Welfare, Public Grievances and Pension Administration and Shri Pratap Jena, Minister for School & Mass Education are also present.