

## Women of Odisha : Status and Challenges

*Prof. Asha Hans*

*Dr. Amrita Patel*

The persisting subordination of women in India was brought out by the report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) published in 1975. The report broke the myth of women's equality which prevailed during the post-Independence years. The status of women in Odisha was not studied in a comprehensive way till 2004. This article is an attempt to update the data and analyze change in women's status. The status of women in Odisha is a complex issue and with many intricate factors of which only some have been covered in this article.

### **FEMALE SURVIVAL & MORTALITY**

#### **Sex Ratio**

Women's status is linked to the whole cycle of female survival beginning with the sex ratio which is a fundamental indicator in our understanding of inequality and female aversion.

The sex ratio in Odisha declined drastically from 1086 in 1921 to 972 in 2001. However it has improved marginally to 978 as per 2011 Census data.

The decline in Child Sex Ratio (CSR) is the main cause of concern as it continues to decline consistently from 967 in 1991 Census to 950 in 2001 Census to even lower 934 as per the 2011

Census. Low CSR shows a remarkable cluster and not a scatter. The districts with the lowest CSR in the 2011 Census data are Nayagarh (851), Dhenkanal (870), Angul (884) and Ganjam (899). The contiguity of districts with very low CSR in their urban population that is disturbing. There is a set of three adjoining districts Ganjam, Nayagarh and Boudh where the CSR (urban) are below 860 (2001 Census) a figure comparable to female to male ratio (FMR) in some of the districts of Haryana and western UP.

Outside the data and quantitative analysis provided by academics and government officials, the mass killing of the girl child before birth found public concern, as for instance the media highlight of Nayagarh District in 2007. It seems that the PCPNDT Act (1995 & 2003) has yielded little result. Easy availability and affordability of sex determination techniques coupled with the absence of proper enforcement of Acts and poor Monitoring of clinics and medical labs (registration, maintenance of Form "F" and analysis of birth and death registers / records). The legal mechanism seems inadequate to tackle the sex determination incidences whether from the demand side or the supply side.

The problem is a social one specifically linked to girl child dislike due to dowry and lack

of property rights. Simultaneously, while we need to recognize sex selective abortion as an act of discrimination, we also need to respect the right to abortion.

### **Infant Mortality Rate**

The Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) for females has remained lower than males throughout the last two decades. Overall the IMR of Odisha is 65 while that of all India is 50. Female IMR (FIMR) in the state remains one of the highest in India being 66 females per 1,000 live births, with the national figure (India) standing at 52 Rural FIMR is 68 in comparison to 55 of India. There is also a differentiation between urban FIMR in Odisha (46) in comparison to the Indian (34). The urban rural gap is also of high concern and needs special attention.

### **Maternal Mortality**

Maternal mortality in India accounts for the largest number in the world. India's MMR stands at 254 with Odisha at a much higher 303 (SRS, 2009). The NFHS 3 survey reveals that the 62.7% of the ever married women in the age group of 15 to 49 years have anemia which is one of the main causes of maternal mortality besides having low Body Mass Index (BMI). The National Rural Health Mission set up to reduce maternal mortality as one of its goals is too medical and misses out on the social component which is so important to women's health which continues to be below any normal standard of acceptance. The Janani Surakshya Yojana (JSY) under the National Rural Health Mission (2005) has been introduced to decrease MMR and IMR and increase institutional deliveries.

### **Maternal Health**

There has been some improvement in the health provisions for women in Odisha. Antenatal

care has increased from 65% found in NFHS 1 to 87% in NFHS 3. Institutional deliveries however remain low though there has been an increase from 14% (NFHS 1) to 39 % (NFHS 3). Reproductive health care is linked to hospitals and service provision and policy needs to look into the interlinkages with women's working conditions such as in agriculture.

### **Marriage & Fertility**

The silver lining is a declining age in marriage of age of below 18 years. There has been a larger decline in Odisha compared to the all India level. The rural level (39.7) as expected is higher than urban (24.3). There is also a clear role of education as those with less than 5 years of education who married below the age of 18 were 52.1% compared to those who completed 5-9 years falling as low as 29.8% and those with 10 years of literacy it fell to 9.3%. It proves the generally held notion that education plays an important role in eradicating child marriage.

Fertility rate has declined marginally from 2.5 as per NFHS 2 to 2.4 as per NFHS 3.

Several Schemes such as IMR Mission and Mortality Reduction Mission and National Rural Health Mission exist in the State to tackle the situation. What is needed is a social approach to health together with the medical and structural. Increase in decision making by women, and improving awareness, accessibility and services by making them available at the door step, would supplement the fulfillment of health indicators.

### **EDUCATION**

In the state, the establishment of the First Girls High School by Commissioner of Cuttack, Mr Ravenshaw in 1906 and the efforts of Reba Roy and Rani of Khallikote in spreading female

education in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century indicate the emerging social awareness on the need for literacy among women. Female literacy in Odisha has been lower than male and has consistently been below the Indian level. The gender gap also remains at a high 18% (Male-82.40 and female – 64.36, 2011 Census) an indication of gender bias. As per the 2011 Census, the overall literacy stood at 73.45. As a stand alone indicator, it indicates an increase from 4.5% in 1951 to 64.36% in 2011. Women have fared better in literacy because of a number of entitlements provided by the State such as the Sarva Siksha Abhijan. Further assessment of dropouts and new methods of bringing in the girl child would bring them on an equal ground with the boys.

There is a wider gap in Scheduled Tribe (ST) literacy as girl children in many rural tribal areas remain out of school. Nabarangapur for instance has female literacy of 37.22 as per the 2011 Census, and four southern tribal districts average being low at around 37%.

There exists disparity between the general masses and indigenous people. Women from the ST communities remain excluded and though enrolment is increasing, dropout is very high. The State has taken up schemes such as provision of bicycles to ST/SC girls and special hostels but the situation remains critical in tribal areas.

## **WORK PROFILE**

Female work participation is considered as an important indicator of women's involvement in economic activities. As per the 1971 census the percentage of women workers in Odisha to total workers was 10.85 and increased to 31.35 by 2001, and rural work participation of women was at a higher 33.47 % while urban was only

15.45% as per 2001 Census. This is the reason for high female participation rates of the economically poor, the majority of whom reside in rural areas.

### **Unorganized Sector**

75% or more of women are in agriculture and many in the unorganized sector such as mining, beedi manufacturing, NTFP collection and construction work. One of the changes brought in by globalization is the extended unorganized sector within the recognized organized sector which is deprived of most benefits provided by law and agreed upon by the organized sector. This includes maternity benefit, pension and insurance. There is no social protection who work as contractual labourers in the organized sector even though they should be beneficiaries under the Factories Act, The Mines Act, The Dock Workers' Act, The Employees' State Insurance Act and the Workmen's Compensation Act which provide health benefits and compensation to the workers in cases of ill-health and injuries.

In the unorganised sector where the majority of women workers are concentrated, no occupational safety and health safeguards are in place. The female labour force constituting one third of the rural workers in India "face serious problems and constraints related to work such as lack of continuity, insecurity, wage discrimination, unhealthy job relationship, absence of medical and accident care". The tragic paradox of women's labour in the organised sector is their highly visible presence as contract labour within the public sector mines, the most patriarchal of work. Labourers by the thousands employed in head loading, stone breaking, cleaning and other forms of daily wage labour where they are entirely at the mercy of petty contractors and have absolutely no work safety or security In the

unorganised sector they are forced to work beyond work hours, even in advanced stages of pregnancy, have no leave or creche facilities, and are always under threat of being thrown out. In some of the quarries in Odisha, women are forced to work at night and are sexually abused and therefore found not to be 'respectable for marriage'. The economy of women in a patriarchal set up is linked to social norms of acceptance and rejection.

### **Employment**

Reservation of 30% jobs in Public sector for Grade B,C,D has meant higher women's employment in administration. The percentage of women in the organized sector has increased from 4.1% in 1970 to 15.4% by the end of 2007. In the high echelons of administration women constitute less than 0-14%. In comparison there has been a decline in private sector employment for women from 18.7% in 2000 to 10.8% in 2007. The employment registration indicated that only 0.35 lakh were women job seekers compared to 1.47 lakh men. We find that women usually go in for temporary and standby jobs because of the prevailing diffidence to employ women in regular full time jobs with good working conditions which are considered as expensive.

### **Domestic Work**

Another issue of contention is domestic work as an economic activity. In Odisha besides carrying out domestic work such as cooking and looking after the children women also carry out unpaid activities such as maintenance of kitchen gardens, work in household poultry, collecting firewood and cow dung, husking paddy, grinding food grain and collecting water from at least 2-5 kms distance. Unfortunately, under the age of five, girl children at the cost of their education and well

being, engage in near equal domestic activities as below 15 years and adults.

### **Micro Credit**

The network of Women Self Help Groups (WSHGs) across the State and the proliferation of Panchayats with women going above the mandated one third provide work to large numbers of women. Mission Shakti is an umbrella of women self help groups. Though large in number economically on the ground there is a weakness. As per government records there are 3.87 lakhs WSHGs with 46.5 lakh women as members with 4.38 lakh WSHGs having a credit link. In contrast as per NFHS 3, the micro credit loans are very low though knowledge of micro-credit has been found to be high. Some SHGs are doing well after being linked to Mid Day Meals of various schools. Other SHGs have started to tie up with MNCs and Micro Finance Institutions. There is a risk factor in such linkages as they work only for profit while SHGs need a social safety net as they are composed of very poor and mostly illiterate women. The increase in their burden of work through Government entrusting them with too many schemes to run, can also have a deterrent effect as most women have heavy household duties.

### **MGNREGA**

MGNREGA has been introduced as a social net for accessing work for at least 100 days, but in the context of women certain problems have emerged. Among these are the issues related to hard labour by women who are pregnant, single women who have no partners and lower wages. Leaves out old age who are most vulnerable. There has also been less work and low and delayed wages. NREGA together with RTI has emerged as powerful tools to strengthen those outside the formal economy such as women and

these should be monitored and taken advantage of.

### **Trafficking, Migration and Displacement**

As the state joins in the race for globalization there are the adverse effects of displacement, migration and trafficking experienced by women which need urgent attention. Some are forced to move while in the case of others little work and low literacy combine to women moving out to new pastures which unfortunately are unsafe. Exploitation by agents in Delhi, forces them to leave their jobs as domestic workers to join other women in sex work. Some migrate as far as Haryana and Punjab to marry four-five brothers in the restructuring of the mythological Draupadi. Unfortunately they remain sex slaves at night and unpaid farm workers in the day.

About 50% of migrants from Odisha are from the tribal districts women. They go to Hyderabad or Raipur or within the State to Bhubaneswar, to work in brick kilns where they are paid Rs.80 per 1000 bricks made, which normally takes 12 to 15 hours and involves physical labour. They migrate as access to PDS is low, food for work is inadequate to ensure food security. Frequent droughts make agricultural productivity low and availability of work throughout the year is low.

Issues that affect the women migrants are low wages, non payment of wages, gender disparity in wages, forced sex work and trafficking, violence, increased domestic violence and exploitation of single women. There is a lack of education and neglect of children's education, lack of health services for self as well as children and absence of social network in the destination. Food insecurity and malnutrition follows them into migrant territory. There is also lack of legal mechanism for protection and no awareness

among the women on rights and facilities of protection. Prosecution under the Inter State Migrant Workers Act is low as seen from the data of the Labour Department, Government of Odisha. In the years 2000-01 and 2001-02, only 95 and 53 cases have been filed out of which 7 and 13 cases have been disposed respectively. There is a need to empower migrant women and make migration safe.

Due to construction of large dams, establishment of large industries, defence related production, wild life sanctuaries and communal riots, people are being displaced in large numbers. While in migration women go out for a few months, those who are displaced lose their homes and communities permanently. They face the same problems as migrant women, some are born in camps and suffer much more. In Lanjigarh for instance where a large industry has been set up there is large scale sexual abuse of women and trafficking. The law in place in Odisha relating to Rehabilitation does not make any specific provision for women.

### **WOMEN IN POLITICS**

In politics beginning with women joining the freedom movement, to 2009 where elections reflected the sorry status of women in politics in Odisha it has been a struggle. No woman from Odisha is represented in the Lok Sabha. In the Assembly there are only 7 women. Women's inclusion in parties ranged from 8 in BJD to 15 in Congress but their own strength is emerging as 37 women stood as independents in the last national elections. Due to exclusion from political decision making their impact on the state would remain limited, so more women need to be included in the political process. The State has already implemented 50% of seat reservation in Panchayats for women.

## **MARGINALIZATION WITHIN MARGINALIZATION**

There are vulnerabilities among the 13 % of women belonging to single headed households. The women with disabilities (WWD) are marginalized.

## **TRANSPARENCY & ACCOUNTABILITY: GENDER BUDGETING**

One measure of accountability is the amount of money spent on women's programmes. It is important as ensuring equality cannot be achieved unless there are committed funds available for implementing the various policies and schemes introduced by the government. Recent data indicates that though expenditure for social services has been increasing but Women Specific programmes constitute less than 1% of it. Almost all the women specific programmes are concentrated in the Department of Women & Child Development but it has to be noted that the women component planning mandates that all sectors should have 30% of its resources to be allocated for women. The new approach is to enlarge the scope to gender audit which looks at the impact on women of allocations and expenditure.

## **CONCLUSION**

With poor women left with few economic alternatives, as agriculture shrinks and women's access to credit is limited and the dangers of the Micro-Finance Bill looms large; there is a need to open minds and visions on these concerns and specificities of women's situation in the economy. Patriarchy and feudal structure strengthen in these situations and we need to be aware of this danger. There is a need for inclusion of the very poor, the disabled and marginalized. Under these situations education and political power will assist to climb barriers.

Governmental initiatives have been sensitive to women's needs but more concrete steps are needed such as gender audit to know whether the efforts are bearing fruit or not. While the norms of globalization becomes binding on elected representatives and governments, it is however imperative that the policies, programmes and schemes are gender sensitive and not gender neutral.

Women are moving forward in every field motivated by the urge to excel and to find their own space in this universe. Their efforts in politics at the Panchayat level changed the power equation at the local level. Women's agency has emerged as a powerful indicator of the search for justice and equality. They are using their advantages wherever they can and there are more sectors they have entered as engineers, computer analysts and even venturing to space sciences and industry.

We need to build on this advancement of women in Odisha and create a society where we respect women and their human rights.

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Prof. Asha Hans, Former Director, School of Women's Studies, Utkal University & President, Sansristi.

Dr. Amrita Patel, Former Lecturer, School of Women's Studies, Utkal University & General Secretary Sansristi.

