



### Introduction: -

In adherence to our rich Indian tradition since the dawn of society, women have been treated with great esteem and reverence, though sometimes we do find undermining mentions of women. While understanding the History of India and Puranas, the facts brings to light that the inter-relationship between a man and a woman has always been in a state of flux and there has been a plethora of change in the position, rights, and status of women since the beginning of civilization. One relevant idea in understanding the structures of norms and values in Indian society is the dual nature of a female under Hindu Philosophy.

### Historical Account of Women in Odisha: -

Going deep into history of Odisha, through the articles of historians, we can get information of these great ladies of substance. The history of Odisha 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 Odisha. Royal women of these times were benevolent and could donate villages but did not play an active role in affairs of administration. During 736 AD to 945 AD during the rule of Bhaumakars, women enjoyed good position and power. The Bhaumakars follow the

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## Rejuvenating the Status of Women in Odisha : Issues and Challenges

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Women are primarily considered fertile capable of bestowal of property. This dual character reflects in the female deities also, as there are dangerous, aggressive, malevolent goddesses like Kali and Durga; there are equally benevolent goddesses like Lakshmi and Saraswati. Odisha being a state of ancient pedigree and rich culture, having a classical language of its own, having a national recognition, has adhered to the traditions and practices of India. Being an economically struggling society, women empowerment has come to Odisha in a later stage as compared to other communities of the country.

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 financial 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.



**Growth of Global Consciousness:** - The renaissance in Europe, the fall of Czar rule in Russia and the creation of United States of America paved way for creation of civil western societies where rights of women are recognised. Feminist activism in the west has had its impact on the developing countries like India. United Nations, the common policy making and implementing agency in the world, has taken many steps for the empowerment of women. Some measures are,

1. Establishment of the Commission on Status of Women in 1946 to promote women's political, economic and social rights.
2. Adoption of the Convention on Political Rights of Women including the Right to Vote by the General Assembly in 1952.
3. Adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women in 1979.
4. The Fourth World Conference on Women held at Beijing, 1995.
5. The Beijing Plus Five UN General Assembly Special Session, 2000.

#### **Constitutional and Political Empowerment of Women in Odisha: -**

The Odisha State government and the Central government have introduced a number of important measures to 'empower' women in India. For example, the National Commission for Women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 to safeguard the rights and legal entitlements of women, a 33% reservation for women in local politics was passed in the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India in 1992, and the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women was

developed in 2001. India has also signed a number of international conventions that aim to ensure the rights of women, such as the Mexico Plan of Action (1975), the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (1985), CEDAW (1993), and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995). While these commitments are commendable, they operate in parallel to existing traditional values and customs which often contradict the objectives of the State.

Achieving truly decentralised democracy in India has been a long and arduous process. While Gandhi strongly advocated for decentralised democracy, the creator of the Indian Constitution only included the role of village panchayats in the Directive Principles of State Policy. Article 40 of the Indian Constitution states "The State should take steps to organise village panchayats and endow them with such power and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self government". However, this statement does not come under the legally enforceable section of the Constitution. It was not until the passing of the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India in 1992 that Gandhi's vision of a devolved Government finally seemed a reality. A panchayat, which was originally viewed as an assembly of five persons, has now been redefined as the 'third tier' of administration after the Centre and the State government, and constitutes elected representatives at the village, block and district level. The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India Act, which came into effect in 1993, has drastically changed the Indian political process, with far reaching consequences for Indian federalism, decentralisation, gender equality, social justice, grassroots democracy and people's participation in planning for development. The Amendment led the way to a decentralised



Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI), providing more power and autonomy to local level institutions. In Odisha, the PRI is now comprised of three tiers of government. At the village level is the Gram Panchayat (GP), which is the first level of the elected body and covers a population of up to 5,000 citizens. A Sarpanch is the elected Chairperson of the GP, and the Naib Sarpanch is the elected assistant Chairperson. At the next level, the Block, is the Panchayat Samiti, which is the elected body covering between 10 — 20 panchayats. Finally, at the District level is the Zilla Parishad, which covers 4 - 10 Blocks and is the link with the state government. The Gram Sabha, which constitutes all eligible voters within a Gram Panchayat area serves as a principle mechanism for transparency and accountability, and is required to meet at least twice a year. As many villages in Odisha are small and in remote areas, a Palli Sabha has also been established. The Palli Sabha constitutes all eligible voters within a ward, usually up to 250 voters. The Palli Sabha is thus a further, lower level mechanism for citizens to hold their local representatives to account. A ward member is the elected chairperson of the ward. One of the fundamental features of the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India Act is reflected in Article 243D, which states that not less than one-third of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every panchayat shall be reserved for women. Furthermore, clause (4) of the Act states that not less than one third of the total number of offices of chairpersons in the Panchayats at each level shall be reserved for women. The Orissa Gram Panchayat Act, 1964 (amended in 1992), goes a step further and states that if the chairperson is male, the assistant chairperson must be female, and vice versa. In 1992, Odisha became the first state in the country to make provisions for the reservation of seats

for elective functionaries in the local institutions even before the enforcement of the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India. However, despite higher level commitments to devolve government, the on-the-ground realities often paint a different picture. The Act does not take into account the fact that the successful implementation of Panchayati Raj depends to an extent on parallel changes in other aspects of rural life, such as the caste system, gender inequality, and poverty and illiteracy levels.

### **Odisha Entrepreneurship Development Policy (2014): -**

Entrepreneurship also has the potential to promote inclusive growth through empowerment of women, disadvantaged sections as well as educated unemployed youth. A young potential entrepreneur cannot be allowed to get frustrated and move out with broken dream, while he may have the potential to bring about a positive change in the markets. Government believes that if capital is found to be easily accessible, a huge hurdle to start and grow an enterprise will be overcome. Therefore, the Government will mobilize national and state-level organization involved with empowering disadvantaged and underrepresented groups of population such as National Scheduled Caste Finance and Development Corporation (NSCFDC), National Minorities Development and Finance Corporation (NMDFC) and State Women Economic Development Corporations (WEDCs) etc. in providing credit to start-ups launched by individuals belonging to these segments of society. Economic empowerment is the first true step towards empowerment of citizens in any democracy. A large section of our society is still underrepresented and disadvantaged and their adequate representation on socio-economic platform hence is a priority



for the Government. Also, if we wish to achieve economic development in the true sense of the term, inclusive growth where growth trickles to the bottom of the pyramid is imperative. It is for this purpose that the Government wishes to pay extra attention to promote entrepreneurship among focus groups such as women, rural citizens, minorities and people. Self Help Groups (SHGs), especially Women SHGs shall be encouraged to take up entrepreneurial ventures in the areas of primary food processing, handicraft, Khadi and village industries etc. These SHGs shall also be provided with skill-upgradation training linked to production planning, costing, packaging, quality control, technology development, marketing support etc. The state shall provide skill training at prisons/destitute homes/orphanages/juvenile homes and make special efforts to promote entrepreneurship among women and youth among them, in sectors in which they have some competitive advantage like skills, raw material base, etc.

#### **Empowerment through Education: -**

Education is a powerful tool of social transformation. Hence, education for women has to be paid special attention. The Southern part of Odisha where the population of SC/ST people are more and the literacy rate among the women are very less so State Government has opened many tribal schools under department of ST/SC Development, ITDA and special schools for girls such as KGBV (Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya). The Govt. of Odisha also started schemes like establishment of Model Public Schools in block level, supply of bicycles to the students of class 10 free of cost, upgradation of primary schools to upper primary and high schools, supply of four pairs of uniforms free of cost, training to teachers through Samarthya

Programme, appointment of Siksha Sahayakas etc. for the development of education. Self-defence programme for girls, supply of laptop to meritorious students, establishment of high schools, making the schools child friendly by Ama Vidyalaya Yojana, organization of personality development camps for girls, training of MTA members, organization of Meenamela are commendable steps of the Govt. of Odisha for empowerment of women. These schemes are very much helpful for motivating the girls in attending the schools. This helps in the path of women empowerment.

#### **Social Empowerment: -**

Social empowerment of women refers to the steps to be taken to improve the health status of women, reduce maternal mortality especially in the areas which do not have good medical facilities. So Government of Odisha has introduced -Mamata” Scheme, which is specially designed for the pregnant women. Moreover, schemes like -Kishori Balika Yojana” are also there for adult girls to provide them with a healthy life. But still a programme for checking the spread of sexually transmitted diseases like HIV / AIDS and infectious / communicable diseases like T.B. need to be launched. The Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) for females has remained lower than males throughout the last two decades. The urban rural gap is also of high concern and needs special attention. Maternal mortality in India accounts for the largest number in the world. The NFHS 3 survey reveals that the 62.7% of the ever married women in the age group of 15 to 49 years have anaemia which is one of the main causes of maternal mortality besides having low Body Mass Index (BMI). The Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY) under the National Rural Health Mission (2005)



has been introduced to decrease MMR and IMR and increase institutional deliveries.

#### Conclusion: -

“Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and building good governance.” (Koff Annan, Former Secretary General of UN) Illiteracy among women is declining, maternal mortality rates are beginning to fall, and more women are participating in the labour force than before. The utter failure on the policy-makers, legislation, the education system, the media and most other social institutions to take effective measures to break to the institutionalized subordination and inequality of women has delighted to study the aspect of Gender equality in the light of the Indian perspective. However there is a vast sea of legislative measures to uplift the status of women in Odisha; the major concern still remains the implementation. Various incentives and employment opportunities may be provided to improve the number of female students in schools and colleges so that the level of education may be improved. Only by education and increase

in consciousness, the upliftment and empowerment of women in Odisha is possible.

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