



**ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER**

**Political Science**

**WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN ODISHA: THE CURRENT SCENARIO**

**KEY WORDS:**

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**ABSTRACT**

Women throughout the world live in a constant fear and conditions of a deprivation. Women's right refers to freedom from discrimination, exploitation and helps to improve the concept of self-worth. Women in Odisha are facing discrimination irrespective of their status, health, freedom and opportunities. Womanhood is subject to several kinds of cruelties, inhuman behavior and treatment. They face many challenges like right to education, equality, gender rights, right to protection of health; equal wages for equal work etc. women ignore their violation of rights due to consciousness regarding their family prestige and social status. Majority of rural, illiterate and ignorant woman are not willing to change their mindset, beliefs and values. Lack of empowerment of women and greater dependence on men is a big factor to their inferior position. Women in Odisha lack desired level of financial autonomy, literacy, strong personality, own decision making capacity and family support. Women are still struggling to live a life with dignity in real sense. Hence, women's rights violation is a great threat to the welfare and development of the state.

**INTRODUCTION**

Every woman and girl is entitled to equal terms with man without any discrimination. Human Rights of women mean her liberation from any form of discrimination, freedom from the traditional oppressive bonds and self improvement. Human rights norms were merged with parallel process for the advancement of woman and improvement of their status. Every woman is entitled to the realization of all Human Rights – i.e. civil, political, economic, social and cultural on equal terms with man. They also enjoy certain human rights specifically linked to their status as woman. The world has recognized that the human rights of woman are an integral part of Universal Human Rights. In a particular society, women's rights may or may not be ignored, suppressed or institutionalized by law and local customs. Women are guaranteed equal treatment and liberation from discrimination in the most basic human rights treaties. The convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women is a specific treaty of the women's human rights subject. Far-reaching governmental commitments to ensure the human rights of women have been made at each of the recent world conferences. In early 1990, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights along with the series of Global Conferences and the Fourth World Conference on Women promoted human rights of women. The conference provided equal status and created an impression for educating girl child for their awareness and equal opportunity for development.

In a male dominated society, women have raised their voice against all forms of torture, humiliation, oppression to establish their power, their identity and position. In due course of time, women are being objectified for enjoyment and practice of superstitions, traditions and customs. Odisha is a state with cultural, social and economic diversities. In Odisha, though women were held in high esteem, evils like dowry system, child marriage, female feticide and lack of education degraded their status in the society. There are still millions of women struggling for their survival and basic needs of life.

**SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The growing deteriorating social condition of women in Odisha has been resulting in due to the factors like domestic violence, lack of education, poverty, unemployment, frustrations, patriarchal mindset and religious factors etc. The patriarchal attitude of the society perceives woman as an object rather than subject. It gives her a low status in the society. Odisha is the home of more than sixty-two tribal communities which has a unique culture, tradition and social norms. The tradition bound Oriya society maintains a restricted social conduct code for woman. Poverty continues to affect the state and there is a high incidence of rural

poverty. Orissa doesn't offer much opportunity for the educated or professionally qualified women for employment. Literacy has been beyond the reach of most of the women of Orissa. Urban areas have witnessed acid throwing on young girls and poverty has driven girls to prostitution. Lack of empowerment among women and greater dependence on men is a big factor to their inferior position. When a girl is married into another family, there is a tendency by the mother in laws to keep her under control either because they feel threatened or because they do not want these girls to disrupt the family harmony. Female children are given less food both in quality and quantity and therefore they are under nourished as compared to male children. Girls are found often breastfeed for shorter duration than boys. Girls are therefore anemic, do not achieve their full growth and therefore produce malnourished children. This is due to differential treatment or access to resources where girls are at a disadvantage. Girls also face challenges to attend school especially when they attain puberty. Many of the educational institutions do not have gender friendly washrooms. These situations make them susceptible to infections and affect their reproductive health. During menstruation there are dietary restrictions for physical activity which will affect the nutrition and health status of women. One of the causes of malnutrition among girls is the compulsion for girls to eat last and the least whatever is left behind after the men have eaten. This problem is serious among the poorer segments of the society. They do not have the freedom of choice regarding their own lives. When it comes to marriage, decisions are taken by everyone other than the girl herself. Hence, in Orissa a large section of women have little access to health and sanitation. On a daily basis, thousands of women in different parts of Orissa walk many miles to fetch water and firewood. Moreover, without toilets or hygienic living conditions, they lead humiliating and desperate lives. The social and cultural attitudes pull down women. It is the mindsets and self images of women that continue to stand between them and a satisfying life. In Odisha, women are surrounded by limitations instead of possibilities. A woman is still not an individual by herself. She is first a daughter, a wife, a mother, a sister, daughter-in-law or a mother-in-law. The point is while a woman is expected to perform all her roles, it is often forgotten that, she too has an independent status.

The position of women in Odisha can be discussed by analyzing their socio-economic and political problems in the society. Starting with the social problems, Safety of women comes first. Whether literate or illiterate, employed or unemployed, rich or poor women hesitate to go out alone and always prefer to go out in groups. This is because they always have a feeling of fear regarding their safety. It is also found that most of the women in Odisha prefer day shifts in workplace and always try to come back home before dark

hours. In workplace too, there exists inequality between male and female employees. The superiors prefer male employee over women. Another frequent issue faced by women in Odisha is physical and mental torture by their drunken husbands. The victims hesitate to raise their voice against it. According to them, it will hamper the dignity of their family as well as their status in the society. Ignorant women of rural areas do not even realize this as violence against themselves. They think it as a part of their life and society. They consider that as woman they have to go through it. Even the upper class educated women in urban class educated women in urban areas are also found conscious about their societal status and family prestige and hence very often they remain silent. Superstition is a major factor which leads to many problems. Women in Odisha are found to strongly practice superstitions irrespective of their castes, class, educations, status, region etc. No doubt the state government has established a number of hospitals and provides facilities regarding women health care, still most of the rural women hesitate to visit hospitals rather they prefer their superstitious belief.

In economic sphere for the desperate need of monetary funds for their personal expenditure the women in Odisha borrow loans from various schemes provided by the state government e.g. Self Help Group. The women from rural areas participating in SHGs are found illiterate. Moreover they do not know the name of their group. Analyzing women's participation in politics it is found that most of the women (both urban as well rural) do not have free choice to cast their vote. They are strongly influenced by their husband or family preferences. The decisions taken by women who holds any political position is mostly influenced by their husbands. They play a nominal role only. There is less constitutional or legal barrier than the social barrier responsible for the degradation of women's position or status. Majority of rural, illiterate and ignorant women in Odisha are not willing to change their life style, beliefs, values or even mindsets to accept new situations and challenges. Hence, no revolutionary change can be witnessed in the overall status of women in the immediate future. However, as long as the problems of women remain as "women's problems" and not as "social problems" attempts at the solution of the problems do not get the required attention.

The status of women in Odisha, particularly in western Odisha is a complex issue. With many intricate factors such as: - sex ratio, Infant Mortality Rate, maternal mortality, maternal health, marriage and fertility, education, work profile, employment, domestic work, trafficking, migration and displacement etc. 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 date. The Infant Mortality Rate for females has remained lower than male through-out the last two decades. Female literacy in Odisha has been lower than male. There is a wider gap in Scheduled Tribe literacy as girl children in many rural tribal areas remain out of school. 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 kilometers 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. Life expectancy of women in Odisha stands at 62.4 %. The decline in female to male ratios (FMR) is most seen in the age group of 0-6 years. The Maternal Mortality Rate in Odisha is 367 per 1 00 000 live births. Since the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> constitutional amendment in 1993, there has been a steady increase in women's participation in the electoral process, especially in the three – tier Panchayati raj system. Since the entry of women into the political sphere, a favorable environment is still eluding these women leaders to fulfill their duties. Those

in elected positions have had to face great obstacles from even their own families, apart from others in the society. No kind of a support system or a favorable environment has been provided to them to take advantage of the benefits granted to them by the constitution. Incidents of violence and manipulation by their political opponents and others vested interests continue to hamper women's political empowerment in Odisha. In such a background it may be concluded there is a serious challenge exist for women in Odisha.

## CONCLUSION

No doubt various administrative initiatives have been sensitive to women's needs, but in real sense whether the efforts are bearing fruit or not. It becomes a question of serious concern. The status of Women in Odisha is a complex issue with many factors like – Poverty, lack of education, superstitions, belief in Voodoo, culture, customs, consciousnesses, unemployment, domestic violence, trafficking, migration and displacement, negligence in administrative field, religious conflict and discrimination etc. Women's experience of domestic violence shows that violence is not lessened by age. Rural Women are more prone to domestic violence than urban women. Women's political participation is characterized by larger gender gap in voting. This is because most of the women lack desired level of financial autonomy, literacy, strong personality, own decision making capacity, family support etc. Thus these mutually interdependent factors reinforce each other and put women in a disadvantageous position relative to men. Moreover poverty, social norms and family structure, lack of awareness about legal and constitutional provision etc. are some of the major constraints in achieving the desired level of development of women.

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