



Women Movement in Odisha (1936-1976)

Dr. Susmita Mohapatra,
Associate Professor & HOD,
Dept of History, YBN University, Ranchi.

Abstract: The Women's Movement in Odisha, spanning 1936-1976, stands as a transformative force in the region's social fabric. Rooted in India's independence struggle, it evolved post-1947 to address diverse issues social justice, gender equality, and women's rights. Agrarian struggles and socio-economic initiatives were pivotal, challenging norms related to dowry and child marriage. This movement, entrenched in legal frameworks, aimed at transformative changes in marriage laws and inheritance rights. Through historical analysis, this study unravels the nuanced interplay between historical forces and women's collective pursuit of rights and empowerment. This paper briefly explores the significance along with the few significant literature reviews.

Keywords: Women's Movement, Odisha, Socio-economic Empowerment

1. Introduction

The Women's Movement in Odisha spanning the years from 1936 to 1976 constitutes a pivotal chapter in the social and historical fabric of the region. Anchored in the broader context of India's struggle for independence, the pre-1947 period witnessed the convergence of women's aspirations with the nationalist movement. Organizations like the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC) played a vital role in articulating the concerns and rights of women, setting the stage for the post-independence era. Following India's independence, the focus of women's movements evolved to encompass a spectrum of issues, including social justice, gender equality, and women's rights. Odisha, with its unique socio-economic landscape, saw the emergence of women's organizations dedicated to addressing local challenges. Agrarian struggles, particularly pertaining to land reforms, occupied a significant place in the movement, reflecting the agrarian nature of the state. Women actively engaged in challenging societal norms related to dowry, child marriage, and unequal treatment. Simultaneously, efforts were directed towards enhancing educational opportunities and advocating for equal employment rights for women. The movement, deeply rooted in the legal and social framework, sought to bring about transformative changes in marriage laws, inheritance rights, and overarching patriarchal norms. Unraveling the nuances of the Women's Movement in Odisha during this period necessitates delving into regional archives, historical documents, and local sources, offering a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic interplay between historical forces and the collective pursuit of women's rights and empowerment.

2. Reviews

Naik, I. C. (2012). The Tribal women of Kashipur block had expressed that, despite not having their own land, they possessed the option of Podu or shifting cultivation. They believed that the green forests would provide them with roots, mangoes, mahua, sal leaves, flowers, seeds, hill brooms, and firewood. Against this backdrop, the study aimed to analyze the leadership of the women in safeguarding the natural resources, focusing on the loss of livelihood and displacement, leading to poverty, starvation, and diarrhoea deaths in Kashipur block of Rayagada District in Odisha. In the face of challenges, the people's protests against the establishment of the mining industry in Kashipur block were aimed at protecting Jal, Jamin, and Jangal (water, land, and forests). These natural resources constituted the sole sources of their livelihood. Simultaneously, the study examined the extent to which people had been losing their basic rights to traditional livelihood resources due to the process of industrialization and development.

Rath, P. K. (2014). The failure of the Cripps mission to resolve the political deadlock in India and the apprehension of Japanese aggression had led the Congress to initiate another mass movement against the British under the leadership of Gandhiji. In July 1942, a resolution to this effect was introduced in the All-India Congress Working Committee at Wardha, and subsequently, it was presented before the Bombay Session of the Congress. Under the Presidentship of M.A.K. Azad, the historic 'Quit India' resolution was passed on 8th August 1942. A decision was made by the Congress to launch a nationwide non-violent movement, with Gandhiji at the helm. In response, the British Government took swift actions, arresting top-ranking national and provincial Congress leaders. Furthermore, Congress offices were declared illegal and seized. The repercussions of these events were keenly felt in Orissa, where people, already burdened by wartime restrictions, strongly reacted to the arrest of their leaders. The movement quickly spread from Balasore in the North to Koraput in the South. Notably, the active involvement of Odia women such as Rama Devi, Nandini Devi, Gurubari Meher, Pravabati Devi, Parbati Giri, and many others marked a significant and transformative chapter in the history of Orissa.

Raj, S. R. (2017). The development process in Odisha (formerly Orissa) before 2011 is believed to have led to progress but is also thought to have resulted in large-scale dispossession of land, homesteads, forests, and the denial of livelihood and human rights. In Odisha, as the requirements of development increased, the arena of contestation between the state/corporate entities and the people correspondingly multiplied because the paradigm of the contemporary model of growth was not considered sustainable and led to irreparable ecological/environmental costs. It engendered many people's movements. Struggles in rural Odisha increasingly focused on proactively stopping projects, mining, and the forcible acquisition of land, forest, and water, as fallout from the government/corporate sector. Contemporaneously, similar people's movements were happening in Kshipur, Kalinga Nagar, Jaga Tsinghua, Lanjigarh, etc. They did not gain much success in achieving their objectives. However, the people's movement of Baliapal in Odisha is acknowledged as a success. It stopped the central and state governments from bulldozing resistance to set up a National Missile Testing Range in an agriculturally rich area in the mid-1980s by displacing some lakhs of people from their land, homesteads, agricultural production, forests, and entitlements. A sustained struggle for 12 years against the state, using Gandhian methods of peaceful civil disobedience movement, ultimately won, and the government was forced to abandon its project. As uneven growth strategies sharpened, the threats to people's human rights, natural resources, ecology, and subsistence deepened. Peaceful and non-violent protest movements like Baliapal may be emulated in the years ahead.

Behera, R. (2017). The matters on various issues related to the Tribal's struggle and their forest rights in Orissa were highlighted in this paper. It delved into Problems & Prospects, Forest Policies & Social Protest against it, Forest-based Livelihoods, Forest Acts & Management Strategies, Area under forest, Wildlife & Bio-diversity Conservation, Diversion of Forests Land, Livelihood Development, Forest Resources, Rehabilitation and displacement, Tribal & Forest interface, and the Development of Alternate Livelihood in Orissa after independence. The issue of industrialization through foreign investors inducing displacement of local people had been identified as a potential concern, one that the affected people might not easily reconcile with. It was recognized that the offer needed to be made attractive to make the people willing to accept it. A natural bond among the people in a locality was formed through attachment to hearths and homes, community assets, and local resources. This attachment, rooted in the psycho-social behavior of the individual and community in a locality for several generations, constituted a social reality. In all matters of development-induced mass displacement, State intervention was deemed desirable, but with utmost care.

Patel, A., & Giri, J. (2019). The research article had sought to focus on the status of women from the coastal districts of Odisha who had become migrants essentially because of repeated floods and extreme climatic events. Fluctuating weather conditions, the consequent depletion of agricultural work, and the availability of other forms of employment in their place of origin were cited as some reasons behind the migration of these women. The study had particularly looked at Bhubaneswar where women, largely illiterate and landless, mostly belonging to Scheduled Caste groups, had been able to find work on construction sites. Despite evident hardship, they had managed to meet the challenges of living in new urban destinations and, in the process, better their living conditions. This had been reflected in the improvement of their financial status, a newfound focus on educating their daughters, the development of levels of self-confidence, and the overcoming of some deeply entrenched social barriers. However, in other areas, the marginalization of such groups had continued, and vulnerabilities had prevailed in many forms, evident, for instance, in the lack of land ownership by women, the absence of opportunities to upgrade skills to access better work opportunities, and issues of safety and security of young girls.

Mishra, N. (2019). Odisha, the state government and non-government organisations, support and create self-help groups (SHGs) through incentives to engage in income-generating projects as a method to enable and empower

vulnerable women. While the creation of SHGs is evidence of political will and commitment of the state towards facilitating women's empowerment processes, this paper shows that the continuation and success of SHGs largely depends on women's understanding of empowerment. This paper examines processes of empowerment through an investigation of its practice, and emerging meanings, by women in self-help groups in Odisha State, India. The significant contribution of this paper is the analysis of notions of empowerment using voices of women actively engaged in processes of reclaiming agency and building capabilities on a daily basis. The narratives were collected from members of 46 self-help women's groups of on their lived experiences of forming and joining SHGs through open-ended interviews and group discussions. Three important aspects of empowerment are highlighted by the women. One is reclaiming agency and building capabilities. A second highlights empowerment as a process of awareness which women deliberated upon in group discussions. Describing empowerment as a process of sachetna (awareness), women insisted that one must know the rules, learn them, stand on one's own feet, and network with others locally, and only then freedom from soshan (injustice) was possible. A third key aspect to understanding empowerment is the women's aspiration for self-respect which is linked to becoming income-earners. Earning an income through participation in self-help groups, for instance, leads to gaining respect from family and the community at large. This paper shows that in addition to agency and capability-building, awareness and respect are integral to women's understanding and experience of empowerment.

Nielsen, M. O., & Tripathy, L. (2020). This paper explored the growth and evolution of women's agency and leadership through women's thrift and credit collectives known as the Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in Odisha, an eastern province of India. The paper intended to analyze the manner in which these women collectives were responsible for micro capital generation and had graduated from being passive moneylenders to impacting family and community-level decision-making. The paper also discussed how these SHGs, by ensuring financial autonomy to rural women, had enabled them to climb the layered empowerment ladder. While sustained economic functions had helped them graduate from merely a savings outfit to investing in small-scale income-generating ventures to disbursing farm credit, the decision-making functions of these women's collectives had gone a long way in impacting village development decisions and were not limited to thrift and credit only.

Misra, B. K. (2021). Nabarangpur is presently a tribal dominated district of Odisha with 55.8% of its population belonging to different tribal groups. The district and its people were under the rulers of Jeypore, and when the King became the British protectorate, the people also came under colonial administration and became subject to colonial mode of exploitation. However, they did not revolt against the British till the Quit India Movement when they actively took part in the freedom movement and faced the police brutality. Papadahandi firing of Nabarangpur is an instance of police brutality that makes the sacrifice of the tribals in freedom movement. Under this background, this paper makes an attempt to present the nature and extent of tribal participation in freedom movement of the country.

Misra, B. K. (2022). Koraput District was one of the 13 districts of Odisha up to 1992. It is a tribal dominated district of Odisha with 55.22 of its population belonging to different tribal groups. The district and its people were under the kings of Jeypore, and when the king became British protectorate, the people also came under colonial administration and became subject to colonial mode of exploitation. However, they revolted against the British since the beginning of establishment of the empire. They also actively took part in the India's freedom movement and faced police brutality. Mathili Firing, Papadahandi Firing and Jeypore Firing are instances of police brutality that makes the sacrifice of the tribals in the freedom movement. Laxman Naik, a tribal leader, participated in the movement and was hanged by British authorities. Under this background, this paper makes an attempt to present the nature and extent of tribal participation in the freedom movement in India.

Pandey, A. D. (2023). In the past, this chapter had explored unsung climate heroes who played crucial roles in correcting human-made climate change and disaster management in India. The research had been based on longitudinal ethnographic fieldwork conducted among the Kondhs in Niyamgiri, women in the village Dthinkia, and climate leaders in Nayagarh, Odisha, spanning from 2016 to 2022. It had presented three case studies highlighting the endeavors of rural and indigenous women in Odisha, leading the struggle to preserve endangered forests, mountains, rivers, and other vital natural resources. Firstly, the Thengapalli women of Nayagarh, who had used sticks to protect the village and the forest, had been actively working towards global climate action and environmental awareness. Secondly, the women of Dthinkia village, holding leadership roles, had protested persistently against the Odisha government's efforts to construct a mega steel plant, aiming to protect their native land and livelihood. Thirdly, indigenous women of Niyamgiri mountain had staged protests against mining, advocating for the preservation of their land and spirituality. Their network building through social media had resulted in a global alliance of indigenous peoples, aiming to protect the Niyamgiri mountain as a solution to the worldwide climate crisis. The work had drawn on numerous life experiences of grassroots organizers and activists who were intimately connected with their land.

They had shared how their lives and livelihoods had been crippled by development projects contributing to global warming. These women in rural and tribal regions had served as teachers, imparting new insights for a stable and sustainable future. Their life experiences had introduced a new vision of life and livelihood to cope with disasters. The stories of these unsung heroes had strongly suggested that women should not be treated as marginal to the projects of development propagated by the state and corporations. Compelling evidence from India and other parts of the world had shown that women had organized themselves in various movements to protect their land, livelihood, forests, and other national resources. The conclusion had emphasized that it was incumbent upon policy-makers at the United Nations and the respective states, at various levels of local, state, federal, and supranational organizations, to incorporate women's experiences and perspectives in making policies on development, recognizing the lasting impact on their lives and livelihoods.

3. Significance of Women's Movement in Odisha (1936-1976)

The "Women's Movement in Odisha (1936-1976)" holds significant historical and social importance, representing a transformative period in the journey towards gender equality and women's empowerment. The movement played a crucial role in shaping the socio-political landscape of Odisha during these four decades. Following are few key significances which reflect the Women's Movement in Odisha during 1936-1976.

Foundation for Women's Activism: The period laid the foundation for organized women's activism in Odisha. Grassroots mobilization during the initial years created a platform for women to actively engage in social and political issues, setting the stage for more targeted and organized efforts.

Empowerment Through Socio-Economic Initiatives: The focus on socio-economic empowerment was significant. The movement aimed to challenge traditional gender roles and improve the economic conditions of women. Initiatives promoting economic opportunities, better working conditions, and access to resources contributed to changing societal perceptions about women's roles.

Legal Reforms and Political Participation: The movement actively advocated for legal reforms to address gender-based discrimination. Activists worked towards changing discriminatory laws and policies, ensuring that women had equal rights under the law. The call for increased political participation marked a shift towards influencing decision-making at various levels.

Educational Advancements and Awareness: The emphasis on education and awareness was a cornerstone of the movement. Efforts to break stereotypes and promote education for women aimed to empower them with knowledge and skills. Awareness campaigns addressed societal issues such as child marriage and dowry, fostering a sense of agency among women.

Pioneering Women Leaders: The period saw the emergence of pioneering women leaders who actively contributed to the movement. These leaders played a crucial role in shaping the discourse around women's rights, challenging societal norms, and advocating for policy changes.

Cultural and Social Shifts: The movement contributed to cultural and social shifts by challenging traditional norms and stereotypes. It prompted discussions about gender roles within families and communities, leading to a gradual shift towards more inclusive and egalitarian perspectives.

Legacy for Subsequent Movements: The women's movement between 1936 and 1976 laid a strong legacy for subsequent feminist movements in Odisha. It created a precedent for ongoing efforts towards gender equality, inspiring future generations of women activists.

Recognition of Women's Issues: The movement played a pivotal role in bringing women's issues to the forefront of public discourse. By addressing concerns related to education, economic opportunities, legal rights, and political representation, it contributed to the broader recognition of women's rights as integral to societal progress.

The significance of the Women's Movement in Odisha (1936-1976) lies in its multifaceted impact on societal attitudes, policies, and the overall empowerment of women, contributing to a more equitable and just society.

4. Conclusion

This paper briefly explored the significance of the Women's Movement in Odisha (1936-1976) along with a few key literature reviews, summarizing the enduring impact and contributions of the movement. The Women's Movement

in Odisha from 1936 to 1976 left an indelible mark on societal norms and structures. Its legacy echoes through the socio-economic advancements, legal reforms, and cultural shifts it spearheaded. Pioneering women leaders laid the groundwork for subsequent feminist movements, emphasizing education, economic opportunities, and political participation. The movement's focus on legal frameworks challenging discriminatory norms shaped the trajectory of women's rights. The significance lies in its role as a catalyst for broader societal changes, fostering inclusivity and egalitarian perspectives. The recognition of women's issues within public discourse and subsequent policy changes attests to the movement's enduring impact, paving the way for a more equitable and just society in Odisha. The multifaceted contributions of this movement continue to resonate in ongoing struggles for gender equality worldwide.

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