Chapter-III

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF WOMEN IN ORISSA POLITICS
Geo-Demographic Profile of Orissa

Perpetually washed by the blue-waters of the Bay of Bengal, Orissa lies in the Eastern Zone of India with a land area of 1,55,782 square kms. (60,171 square miles), which is about 4.8 percent of the total area of the country. The present population of the state is about 26 million, 3.8 percent of India's total.\(^1\) The average density of population in Orissa is 169 per square km. against 221 \(^*\) in India. The coastal region covering 23.4 percent of the total area of the state has 45.6 percent of the total population, whereas the inland region having 76.6 percent of the total area contains 53.4 percent of the total population.\(^2\) The inhabitants of Orissa are mostly Oriyas, and their mother-tongue is Oriya. The state has 38.2 percent of its population as tribals, which is 13.4 percent of India's total tribal population.

Even though Orissa shows a steady increase in population, the sex ratio has steadily widened in the state since 1921, registering a decline in the female

\(^1\)1981 Census, Report, India and Orissa.

\(^2\)Tourism Directory of Orissa, Department of Tourism and Cultural Affairs, Bhubaneswar, 1976, p.132.

(\(*\)) According to 1981 Census, the density of population for India excludes Jammu and Kashmir.
population. Nonetheless, it is higher than the national figure. Orissa accounts for 982 females per 1000 males, whereas the corresponding number is 935 per 1000 in the country. The Census (1961) reported an excess of females over males. The trend turned reverse in the year 1971 and matched with the low sex-ratio pattern of the country.

Orissa, unlike many other states in the country, does not rank high in urbanization. Slow urbanization has brought about a correspondingly slow growth of urban population. This is mostly due to the low economic development of the state. Noticeably, the demographic growth rate in the rural areas is insignificant when compared to urban areas. The decennial growth rate of the state out of total of 19.7 percent (1971-81) is 68.3 percent in the urban area against only 15.3 percent in the rural area. With 38.2 percent rural population, Orissa remains at the bottom of the urbanised states of India.

---


There were 1,086 females in 1921, 1,067 in 1931, 1,053 in 1941, 1,022 in 1951 and 1,001 in 1961, per 1,000 males, according to the respective census reports. But since that time the sex-ratio widened with 988 females in 1971 and 982 in 1981, in 1,000 males. Whereas the female population shows a declining trend in our country since 1901 with 972 females in 1901, 964 in 1911, 955 in 1921, 950 in 1931, 945 in 1941, 946 in 1951, 941 in 1961, 950 in 1971, per 1000 males. Subsequently female sex-ratio has shown an upward trend with 935 females for 1,000 males in 1981 census.
In literacy, Orissa's position is very low. The 1981 Census records the state literacy figure at 34.1 percent against 36.3 percent at the national level. In India 46.0 percent males are literate against 22.0 percent females, and correspondingly in the state 44.5 percent males are literate against 13.9 percent females. Against a total 57 percent of urban literacy, the literacy rate of urban females is 42.5 percent, which is three times higher than the rate of female literacy in rural area (14.1 percent out of total 28.1 percent rural literacy). Of late, women in Orissa have started enjoying almost equal status with men and their education has become a matter of great concern. Yet, the state falls within the six noted backward states in regard to women's education thus containing a very large segment of illiterate female population. However, the literacy rate does not show the true picture of actual literacy

5B. Tripathy, A Portrait of Population, Orissa, Census of India, 1971, Series 18, Orissa, Cuttack, p.211.

6Towards Equality, Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, Department of Social Welfare, Govt. of India, 1975, p.352. There has been a remarkable development from 1971 to 1981, female literacy rate being subject to a leap (from 13.9 to 21.1 percent) of 7.2 percent out of the total 7.9 percent increase all over the state.
in the state, specifically of women, considering the number of drop-outs at the primary level onwards. The enrolment statistics in different classes upto 1976-77 presents a low degree of women's education in the state.

Again the pattern is not uniform throughout the state. Apart from the rural-urban discrepancy, in the coastal and hilly regions of Orissa, the educational imbalance is very striking. In a modernized coastal district, Cuttack, 41.4 percent males against 26.8 percent females are literate; correspondingly, in a hill district, Koraput, 11.6 percent males as against 5.8 percent females are literate.

Considering the near equal sex-ratio of the population, only a few women are in the work force. According to 1981 census, females constitute 16.9 percent against 54.4 percent males of the state’s total work force. The few women who hold higher education mostly


8 From the available statistics upto 1976-77, 36.5 percent of girls were enrolled in primary education (class I-V), 23.2 percent in middle school (from class VI-VIII), 21.2 percent in Secondary and Higher Secondary Level (IX-XII), 0.04 percent in vocational and special courses, 3.5 percent in University and College level and 0.01 in professional and special courses.
choose professions such as teaching, medical services, administrative and clerical jobs in both private and public sectors. Of a total 16.9 percent female work force, 11.3 percent (a majority) are rural women. It shows that even in urban area the educated women sometimes prefer to remain within the household. Among the uneducated women, 78 percent are cultivators and agricultural labourers. Under the dark spell of illiteracy and rigid social taboos, their labour does not achieve recognition and they are considered "non-participants" in the labour force.

Thus the discrepancy emerges between males and females on the sex-ratio, education, urbanisation and labour force. It is in this context of distinctive demographic characteristics that one has to understand the role of women in the political structure of Orissa, and assess their participation accordingly. A study of women in Orissa politics should precede a study of the state's political culture.

Orissa's Political Culture

Orissa has a traditionally caste-based Hindu society, and the political, economic, social and academic leadership in the state is mainly drawn from amongst the
upper caste Hindus. The dominant castes of the Oriya society are the Brahmins, Karans and Khandeyats. The Scheduled Tribes who make about one-third of the state's population are not politically active, except when they provide a pressure group during the elections.

Among the upper caste Hindus, the Brahmins dominate the academic life of the state. Most of the white collar jobs in the government are monopolised by them. The Karans in spite of being a minority are politically more conscious and able to dominate the political life of the state. Besides, the ex-princely class (the Kshatriyas) were in power in the pre-independent days, particularly in charge of the western Orissa.

According to F.G. Bailey, the Karans of Orissa in general and those of Cuttack in particular are regarded as "clever manoeuvrist", and they occupy important positions in the state.9

In the electoral sphere, Orissa can be divided into two parts: (1) Coastal region consisting of six districts of Cuttack, Puri, Balasore, Sambalpur, Ganjam

and Koraput. These districts had formed the province of Orissa in British India. (2) Western Orissa with ex-princely districts of Keonjhar, Mayurbhanj, Dhenkanal, Phulbani, Sundergarh, Balangir and Kalahandi. The latter came into existence, consequent upon the merger of 23 feudatory states (falling within the 7 districts noted above) with Orissa during 1948-49.

Thus in terms of political evolution, one part stands in marked contrast to the other. This has had an important effect on the growth of personalities out of sub-regional politics. To comprehend the political dimensions of life it is necessary to have a look at demographic and socio-economic factors. The socio-economic factors have had an important role in shaping political behaviour on the basis of region.

Intra-regional disparities exist in education, industrialisation, urbanisation, communication and per capita income. In the field of education, a disparity between coastal and hilly areas can be noted. It is because coastal Orissa which was under British rule had better educational facilities for the masses than western Orissa which was under feudal rule. In terms of demographic composition also, an important difference
between coastal and western Orissa can be found. Eighty percent of the tribals live in western Orissa as against twenty percent in coastal area.\(^{10}\) The former lack organization, articulation and discrimination in power politics. Again, due to the availability of educational facilities and job opportunities, coastal Orissa witnessed the growth of a large, professional middle class which was absent in western Orissa. The difference was to some extent related to the ex-rulers’ preference for outsiders for administrative jobs.\(^{11}\) Bailey rightly pointed out that because of such a difference the national political parties such as Congress, the Communists and P.S.P. found it difficult to build up an organisation in the western Orissa since they depended on organisers and leaders from the middle class.\(^{12}\)

The small middle class (whose interest roughly coincides with the interest of the ex-rulers) constitutes an important "reference group" for the uneducated voters in the western Orissa. They are not favourably disposed

\(^{10}\text{Compiled from District Census Hand Books, 1981.}\)

\(^{11}\text{F.G. Bailey; Politics and Social Change, Orissa in 1952, Berkeley, 1961, p.176.}\)

\(^{12}\text{Ibid., p.176.}\)
towards the natives of coastal area, for the simple reason that the latter's entry would impair their own position. Such is the fundamental disparity between the coastal and western Orissa. It has had some important consequences in the political field.

**Women in Orissa Politics**

The profile of women in Orissa would constitute regionally one component of the overall study of the Indian women. Investigation into the political participation of women in a state like Orissa is a difficult task for a variety of reasons. In the pre-independent India, Orissa was a collection of princely states. These states had separate administrative systems. General progress and political awakening in all fields were slow, compared to the rest of the country. Orissa got an exposure to the west rather late. To a great extent the political status of women is affected and determined by the general attitude of society towards them. In Orissa, lack of proper education, economic imbalances, social taboos and immobility explain why women remain politically dormant so long. The picture registered a change only after Gandhi's call for women's emancipation in 1920's. Thus, women in Orissa had their first socialization in the
political sphere during the struggle for independence.

**Women's Voluntary Associations and the Freedom Struggle**

The emergence of women into political limelight coincided with the non-cooperation movement of 1921. Labanya Mayee Devi (daughter of a famous writer and Advocate Gopal Chandra Prabharaj and wife of a distinguished Advocate Lokanath Behadur of Puri) founded a women's association at Puri ("Mahila Bandhu Samiti"). It had the primary membership of a few eminent ladies from the elite class. Involved exclusively in the literary activities of women, this association gave recognition to women's talent and creativity. At this point of time the Congress Party, largely because of Gandhi, made inroads into the public mind of the state. In 1921, the first Utkal Pradesh Congress Committee was founded under the Presidentship of Pandit Gopalabandhu Das with forty thousand members. During his tour of Orissa, in March 1921, Gandhi addressed various public meetings; in the process, he awakened the women of Orissa who dared to defy convention. These women left their houses in large numbers in order to participate in the freedom struggle.

Into the Gandhian spell, fell a large number of women activists. These included Smt. Sarala Devi, Rama
Devi, Malati Chowdhury, Janaki Devi, Godavari Devi, Dr. Radharani Devi, Pravabati Devi and others. They were from reputed families with political connections. These women had great influence over the rest. They participated in various activities of the freedom struggle, such as, satyagraha, spinning, cottage industries and other related programmes under the aegis of the national Congress.

This resurgence of women not only influenced individual men and women but also the whole family and this eventually created an atmosphere for a new social order. In the year 1929, Orissa was the last state to enfranchise women. This belated act served to accelerate women's emancipation.

The famous "satyagraha" in the year 1930 had involved women activists like Sarala Devi, Kishorimoni Devi, Malati Devi and others. The movement began with the celebration of 26th January 1930 as the Indian Independence day. Under Rama Devi's leadership another

---

14 See (local), dated 7.4.1930.
15 See (local), the local daily, dated 1930.
group of women organized civil disobedience at
Balasore. The women and students all over Orissa
responded warmly to the agitation led by Acharya
Harihar and Gopabandhu Choudhury. The involvement
of Smt. Bhagyabati Devi of the Kujang-Raj family in
this satyagraha drew special attention. Following her
lead, at least five hundred women came forward
courageously to prepare the contraband salt. About
sixteen hundred people participated in the preparation
of salt on 9th May 1930 under the leadership of Sarala
Devi and others at Huma in Ganjam. About one-fourth of
the participants were women who enthusiastically joined
the struggle. The former queen of Paradip along with
Rama Devi led the satyagrahis at Gandakipur, Cuttack.
Rama Devi inspired the women and children volunteers to
collect saline earth, which was later brought to private
houses for the preparation of salt.

16 Utkat Dipika, dated 26.4.1930.

17 Asa, dated 14th April, 1930, it is worth
mentioning that both Gopabandhu and
Acharya Harihar left their jobs of Sub-
Magistrate and Teachership respectively to
join the freedom struggle.

18 Utkat Dipika, 14th June, 1930.

19 The Samaja, 14th May, 1930.

20 Commissioner, Orissa O.No.150 to the Chief
Secy., dt. 12th June 1930. Reference, H.K.
Mahatab, The Study of the Freedom Movement,
Orissa, Vol.V (Supplement), Cuttack, 1959,
p.4.
Through women's participation in "Salt Satyagraha", Gandhi continued to exhort women to channel their political energies into constructive work. 21 Sarala Devi, Rama Devi and Malati Chowdhury were the first among hundreds of women arrested along with the male leaders. 22 The satyagrahis had to pay punitive tax and fines to the tune of rupees two lakhs to the British government.

During their term in jail, in this period, Kuntala Kumari Sabbatt, an upcoming patriotic poetess infused a revolutionary spirit into the heart of the people through her writings such as Ahwana (calling), Sphulinga (Particles of fire) and so on. Her poems were recited in public by the student leaders in order to awaken people's consciousness and involve them in the freedom struggle.

The Civil Disobedience movement was called off by the Congress followed by Gandhi-Irwin pact on 4th March, 1931. The Karachi session of Congress was held in

---

21 Mahatma Gandhi, Young India, 15th December, 1921.

22 Indian Social Reformers, Aug. 9, 1930, p. 789.

the same year. Most of the Congress leaders from Orissa attended this National Conference. Kuntala Kumari wrote a poem 'The tribute to Bhagat Singh' in memory of martyr Bhagat Singh at the time of the conference. Her poem was circulated among the members. Sarala Devi addressed the opening session of this Congress. On the part of the Oriya women, this was a historic achievement.

Sarala Devi also persuaded Gandhi to use his good offices in securing recognition for Orissa as a separate state. She wrote in this context: "...on 1st April, 1931, we, all the representatives from Orissa, went to Gandhiji to appraise him of the issue and to receive his advice. Mahatmaji was very pleased to meet so many lady delegates from our province... Regarding a separate Utkal he said, 'I have already taken up the issue in the discussion with the Congress authorities. I shall press for it myself as the representative of Orissa at the Round Table Conference'". 24

Orissa provincial women's conference (Nikhila Utkal Mahila Sammilani) was held in 1931 at Balasore.

24 The Samaj, 8th April, 1931.
It was presided over by Kuntala Kumari Sabat. First of its kind, the Balasore Conference was very successful. The conference attracted a large gathering of women from different parts of the state. Such an effort to bring about a degree of political consciousness and a spirit of revolt among women has not been witnessed for the second time in the history of Orissa.

Social Reconstruction in Orissa: Women's Role

During Gandhi's "Padajatra" programme, women were called upon to fight the evils of drink, boycott foreign clothes and discard untouchability. Gandhi's constructive programme had in its objectives, the training and education of women in the fundamentals of organized activity and propaganda. Moreover, the participation of women in the constructive programme enabled men to organize social reform on a local plane. The programme included several social reform activities.

Inspired by Gandhi's teachings, Rama Devi and her associates participated in the development of khadi and village industries. They organized boycotting of foreign clothes and picketing before liquor shops. These women along with Sailabala Das (daughter of
prominent Advocate and maker of modern Orissa, Madhusudan Das) made an extensive tour by foot all over the state to inspire the women community, awaken their consciousness against bondage, and finally draw them into the fray of freedom-struggle.