

# Adivasi Women In An Industrial Milieu

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## *Abstract*

*To study the dynamics of displacement as a result of development projects and analyze its impact on the social, cultural and economic condition of the displaced tribal, a case study of the Oraon tribe, whose members were displaced by the installation of the Rourkela Steel Plant in the Sundergarh district of Odisha, was undertaken. With a sample size of 300 respondents, the area of study comprised two resettlement colonies and two villages in and around Rourkela. Separate interview schedule were devised for respondents below 60 years and above 60 years of age. This particular paper focuses on the educational and economic changes in the status of displaced adivasi Oraon women who were gradually exposed to forces of industrialization and urbanization.*

Tribal societies are usually assumed to be egalitarian where men and women have same rights. But this is more of a generalization than a well surveyed fact. The values, socio-economic structures and life styles are shaped by their economic histories which are unique to each tribe. Therefore power and gender relations in a tribe practicing settled agriculture differs from that of the hunting and gathering tribe. In pre-industrial tribal societies, like many non-tribal rural communities, the women bear the major burden of providing food to the family and they are the pillars of pastoral and shifting cultivation households

As industrialization sweeps through countries across the globe, its repercussions on the status of women has become an emerging field of study among the intellectuals. This new interest has been voiced during the Beijing World Conference on Women, in which large number of NGOs from across the globe participated. The conference offered a 'south-based' model of women and development under the 'NGO Declaration'. It said, "Dominant development models have been based upon the appropriation of resources from the South by the North and the transfer of ideas, technologies and methodologies from the North to the South. We must build upon alternative models that currently exist in both South and North, which are based on equality, mutual respect, true participation and accountability to all women. These models must be economically and socially equitable and environmentally sound. All development projects must take into account their effects on women, including the additional workload imposed on women by unsustainable and inappropriate technology." (Jain 2005: 144)

This paper is a part of a study conducted on the Oraons of Sundergarh district in Odisha, who were displaced due to the installation of Rourkela Steel Plant. A sample size of 300 respondents spread over the residential sectors of Rourkela, two resettlement colonies and two villages were chosen. One of the villages was a reclamation camp and the other a partially displaced village. The objective of the study was to understand the economic changes that have taken place within the tribe and its impact on the cultural life of the *adivasis*. This particular paper focuses on the educational and economic changes in the status of displaced *adivasi* Oraon women who were gradually exposed to forces of industrialization and urbanization.

The Oraons practiced subsistence agriculture before displacement. Though women also

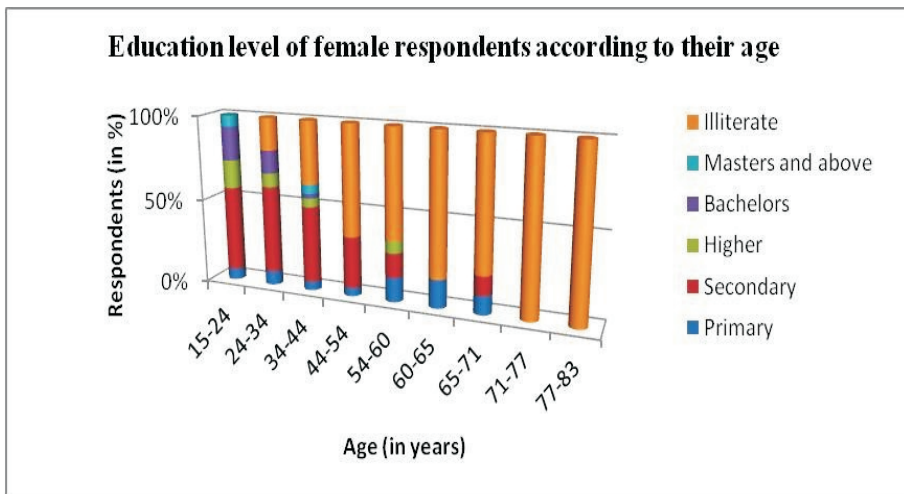
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played important role, agricultural activities were pre-dominantly carried out by the men. Collection of minor forest produces like *mahuli*, firewood, *kurunj* seeds and roots etc was the majorly carried out by women. Usually these produces were used for household consumption, but during times of distress like drought or famine, these were sold for cash or kind. Apart from collection of minor forest produce, women also made handicraft items like rags, brooms, baskets, umbrellas etc. These items were also used for household consumption. All these work the women did along with the daily household chores. But the contribution in the household did not necessarily accrue more decision making power to the woman. According to the customary laws of the tribe Oraon women do not have right to property. Their society is patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal. Before displacement, lack of infrastructure and traditional values did not allow Oraon women to move outside their villages, without being accompanied by their male counterparts. According to the Oraon traditions women were not allowed inside the Sacred Grove or *saran*, as it is considered inauspicious.

Widespread illiteracy was found among female respondents who were born and attained their schooling age before displacement and were witness to the immediate changes in their societies after eviction. During the survey all the female respondents above seventy two years of age admitted that they never went to any educational institution. Though it could be presumed that lack of education might be due to the absence of schools and infrastructure, a look at the status of education among the male respondents above seventy two years of age raises a question. Although majority of the seventy plus male respondents were illiterate, couple of them received schooling till senior secondary level (6<sup>th</sup> -10<sup>th</sup> std) while one of them even acquired a bachelors degree. Therefore existence of discrimination against girls regarding education cannot be ruled out. After displacement and industrialization there is a gradual increase of educational status as we move towards the younger age groups, that is, those who were born and brought up after displacement in an industrial setting, as is shown in the table given below.

Chart 1



As shown in **chart 1**, all the female respondents belonging to 72-83 years of age groups were illiterate. In the 61-71 age groups, though illiteracy predominates there were close to twenty

percent (20%) of the respondents who had primary and secondary level education. In the 55-60 age group, literacy level rose to thirty four percent (33.7%) and few respondents even reached 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> standard. There was a slight increase in the literacy level (35%) in the 45-54 age group. But the literacy level shoots up to sixty percent (60.6%) among the 35-44 year old female respondents, and touching eighty percent mark among the 25-34 years old and finally reached hundred percent literacy rate among the 15-24 year old girls. The gradual rise in the literacy level of women is the result of industrialization and the consequent urbanization. The availability of educational infrastructure coupled with the various Government policies for spread of education played a major role in the rise of literacy level among the Oraon girls. Although we can see a gradual spread of literacy, only few respondents had managed to go beyond 10<sup>th</sup> standard. There was a high drop out rate in both the rural and urban areas. The number of illiterate respondents was more in rural areas as compared to the urban and semi-urban region. In Tangarpalli seventy one percent of the female respondents and in Sili Kata seventy percent of the respondents were illiterate, while in Jalda twenty five percent and in Jhirpani twenty one percent of the female respondents were illiterate.

Spread of education among the women also led to increase in the age of marriage. Although prohibited by the customary Oraon laws child marriages was a common phenomenon before displacement, as told by the respondents during FGDs and personal interviews. After displacement a rise in the age of marriage among the girls was noticed. The main reason for this change was the spread of education, which is gradually being seen as a status symbol. One of the respondents said, *“Nowadays education is of foremost importance and a girl should complete her education up to post- graduation level before getting married ...only after that one should start looking for a groom.”* This statement sums up the general feeling among the respondents regarding a girl's marriageable age and her education. The data supports the fact. No female respondent below 18 years of age was married. Only eight out of the twenty five respondents aged 18-24 year old were married, while among twenty seven respondents aged 24-30 years, nineteen were married. The number rose to twenty two married women out twenty four female respondents in the 30-36 years age group. There was one widow and an unmarried respondent in this group. On being asked to enumerate the changes due industrialization which they felt were positive, eighty eight of three hundred respondents chose spread of education out of nine options, while twenty respondents pointed out the gradual rise of marriageable age for girls.

Education has empowered these women to such an extent that many of them are now questioning the age old Oraon tradition to restrict a women from entering places of worship. A *sarna* in the middle of Rourkela have become the center of their movement. Oraon women from all spheres of life worship inside this *Sacred Grove*. The head priest of the *sarna* is also a woman. Certain other religious traditions like animal sacrifice, witchcraft, and offering and drinking of rice beer is also questioned by these women.

Industrialization opened a number of avenues for income generation. But unfortunately very few women could avail this opportunity. Although during the survey two hundred and ninety nine respondents out of three hundred respondents said that women should be allowed to earn, but the data shows a contrasting picture. While sixty nine (68.59%) percent of the male respondents in the 15-60 years age group were employed, only twenty six (25.89%) percent of the female respondents were earning. It is startling to see that of the thirty six female respondents (out of 139) in the 15-60 years age group only five were engaged in organized sector and the rest of them worked in unorganized sector.

In the two resettlement colonies and the partially displaced village situated close to the Steel Plant, most of the earning female respondents worked as casual labourers, either inside or outside the Plant. Apart from this, few women run small shops, jointly or solely owned by them. A couple of women also worked as housemaids in the resettlement colonies.

In all the areas studied by the researcher except Sili Kata, the income level of women was much below that of men. In the two urban resettlement colonies monthly income of the female respondents hardly went beyond Rs 6000/-. In Jhirpani, a resettlement colony located right in the middle of Rourkela city, only twelve female respondents were earning, out of whom nine respondents earned below Rs 3000/- a month.. On the other hand, out of the thirty three male respondents who were employed, fifteen of them earned above Rs 20,000/- a month. In Jalda, which is another resettlement colony, agriculture was the main occupation. Only four female respondents were involved in income generating activities and their monthly income was below Rs 6000/-. Although only nine male respondents were employed in Jalda, their monthly income ranged till 25000/-. In Tangarpalli, a partially displaced village, it was found that very few female respondents were employed as compared to male respondents. Only three female respondents as compared to sixteen male respondents were employed. All the respondents in Tangarpalli, irrespective of their sexes, worked in unorganized sector. The monthly income level of the female respondents was below Rs 6000/- , but amongst the male respondents the monthly income reached Rs 6000-9000 bracket. In all these three areas participation of women in income generating activities is usually imposed on them by their poor economic conditions, which leaves them with no choice but to take up employment under exploitative work conditions to make both ends meet. This type of employment cannot lead to self-reliance. Lodha, who had studied the tribals in Udaipur observed that, “proximity to urban centers had the impact on the opportunities available to women. Technological advancement and infrastructural facilities offered better job oppurtunities of permanent nature to few women...Inhabitants of urban areas suffered from a sense of alienation and various types of exploitation. Economic necessity arising out of desertation by husband, his unemployment, indebtedness, inadequate family earnings etc. compelled woman to work as wage labourer”. (Lodha, 1997:366)

Maximum number of the female respondents engaged in unorganized sector lived in Sili Kata, a reclamation camp studied by the researcher. Subsistent agriculture was the way of life in the village. Collection and sale of minor forest produces (MFPs) was the only source of income. While agricultural activities were carried out by the men, the collection and sale of MFPs was usually carried out by the women. In Sili Kata all the female respondents were involved in the collection and sale of Minor Forest Produce, primarily *kendu* leaves. Sili Kata was surrounded by dense hill and forest ranges. Hence forest produces was in abundance in the area. One kilogram of *kendu* leaves, which they deposited in a storehouse, earned them Rs 35/- from the middleman. But this source of income was only available from April to July, as the *kendu* is a seasonal plant. Thus, a major share of income in the household was contributed by the women. Also unlike in the urban and semi-urban areas, the family in the village depends on the women for other items like handicraft for daily use. Because of their pre-dominant contribution in the household economy, women have more decision-making power in the family. Lodha points out in her study that in “backward region economically active women tended to exercise a greater role in decision-making than in the advanced region. This was an outcome of the locational benefits to the women as in backward region they had a sense of socio-psychological security. They do not suffer from the feeling of being

uprooted from their traditional locale and milieu. Those who are forced to migrate to advanced region or get settled there suffer from 'cultural' as well as 'knowledge' shock and are unable to adjust to individualistic life patters in such areas” (Lodha, 1997:367).

But one cannot ignore the problems that these rural women had to face while carrying out their production activities due to lack of basic infrastructural, educational and medical facilities. The overdependence of the family on the women also increases their work burden. Also compared to women in resettlement colonies, the economic life of the women in this remote rural area is very uncertain. Their life depends on agriculture. But there was no irrigation facility in the village. Therefore they had to depend solely on the monsoon showers, which is erratic. This exposes them to hunger. Being at the bottom of the hierarchy regarding fulfillment of basic needs, women are the worst sufferers.

Industrialization therefore has both its side effects and benefits on the displaced. As one can see that though there is a spread of education, but the economic condition of women is still precarious. The need of the moment is a rehabilitation and resettlement policy which does not just focus on providing economic compensation to the displaced but should have the goal to ensure inclusive development. The policy should focus on providing a safety net for the women, who were uprooted from their traditional set up and get exposed to forces of industrialization. Implementation of Government schemes like NREGA and NRLM can provide them with such support. No resettlement policy up till now gave due attention on the cultural changes that takes place after displacement in a tribal society. In many tribes women enjoy property rights under customary laws, but after displacement, when land is allotted as compensation in favour of the male members, hence refusing women their customary right to property. Finally it could be said that women act as pillars to a society, therefore to strengthen them will result in the strengthening of the society.

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