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Language press and women empowerment: An analysis with special reference to Odia news papers

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Abstract

Media play an important role in a democratic country. It is regarded as the fourth pillar of democracy. In the process of women empowerment media can play a very effective role by highlighting the issues of women. In 2001, the Ministry of Women and Child Development published a policy document, National Policy for Empowerment of Women, The policy document stressed on the role of the media in the process of women empowerment. It is to be noted that in India the language news papers are having wide marked as compared to the English newspapers. Language newspapers are able create an eminent place in the society. This paper makes an attempt to analyses the role of Odia news paper in the process of women empowerment. An attempt has been made to discuss the status of gender inequality in Odisha and the role of the Odia newspapers in eradicating the gender inequality. Being an agent of mass media it can play a very decisive role in highlighting the issues of women apart from bringing positive changes among the minds of the people towards women.

Keywords: Language press, mass media, newspaper, women empowerment, gender inequality

Introduction

Media play an important role in a democratic country. It is regarded as the fourth pillar of democracy. In the process of women empowerment media can play a very effective role by highlighting the issues of women. In 2001, the Ministry of Women and Child Development published a policy document, National Policy for Empowerment of Women, The policy document stressed on the role of the media in the process of women empowerment. It is to be noted that in India the language news papers are having wide marked as compared to the English newspapers. Language newspapers are able create an eminent place in the society. This paper makes an attempt to analyses the role of Odia news paper in the process of women empowerment. An attempt has been made to discuss the status of gender inequality in Odisha and the role of the Odia newspapers in eradicating the gender inequality. Being an agent of mass media it can play a very decisive role in highlighting the issues of women apart from bringing positive changes among the minds of the people towards women.

The Odia news paper can play a very pivotal role in highlighting the problems faced by women as the readership of Odia news papers in Odisha is more than the English news papers. It can throw light on the socio-economic and political status of women. It can also play an important role in influencing people as well as the policy makers.

The language press constitutes one of the most important media to reach millions of people at different parts of the state. Small newspapers coming out from small places in different Indian languages constitute an important segment of the Indian press. These language news papers truly reflect the rich cultural heritage of India. The language newspapers have been able to establish affinity with the people of a particular region. Being an agent of mass media language press can play crucial role in a democratic country like India. The Odia language press occupies an important place in the state.

The history of Odia print media is more than 247 years old. The journey was started with The whole Orissa heralded a new era of journalism with the introduction of a handwritten newspaper called 'Kujibar Patra' edited by Sadhu Sunder Das, a social reformer of that time in 1769. The same newspaper had irregular frequency (sometimes daily, weekly, and fortnightly) was being published from Kujibar Ashram near Chowdwar. Since the printing machine was not available in Odisha, it was written on coarse paper in Odia language and

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distributed in different central places of bazaars, the missionary centers and mission homes of Cuttack town and to the rulers and disciples.

The news items of the newspaper were based on the then political, socio-religious, cultural, and educational matters, and administrative affairs of government. The paper became so prominent in its news coverage that during 1800 A.D it was translated into Hindi and Marhatta languages.

This hand-written newspaper had such a great influence on the then missionary activities that the missionaries were translating the news items and sending to London and those were published and commented in London Baptist Missionary Reports and Journals.

Gouri Shankar Ray started to publish "Utkal Dipika", the first newspaper of its kind in Oriya language in 1866 which continued to provide its message till 1934 with many ups and downs.

Fakir Mohan Senapati, who has been regarded as the father of modern Odia Literature started a news paper called "Sambad Bahik" in 1868 at Balasore.

During that period the King Baikunthanath Dey also established a Press and started a newspaper named "Utkal Darpan". They both became pioneers in the development Oriya language and literature through the publication of their respective newspapers.

At present more than 100 Odia news papers (daily and weekly) are published from the capital city Bhubaneswar and most of are having multiple edition also. It has been found that language news papers are able to create large numbers of readers in the state. It can provide an important link between planners, bureaucracy and the people at the grass root level. Odia language newspapers can be a very effective media for promoting women empowerment. In Odisha the Odia Press provides one of the most important media for reaching out the millions of rural people. In a society where gender discrimination exists in almost every sphere, the role of mass media becomes more important to create public opinion on women issues.

Gender Inequality in India and Odisha:

"Women constitute about 50% of the country's population. But they are largely excluded category in almost all respect. They have been denied of their rights and liberties by male dominated society for which their social economic and political status has remained relatively low."(Bunyan 35). In India gender discrimination is found everywhere. It is to be noted that women in Odisha are also facing gender based discrimination.

Although women are cause of men origin, but they have been exploited their rights by men and men dominating society. "Women belonging to all categories are doubly exploited, first for being women, and second for belonging to particular sections of society."

Gender discrimination is a burning issue in India" as well as in other countries. In India, Son gets more importance than daughter in every sphere of life. In many section of Indian society, boys have freedom to enjoy their rights but girls have to face many restriction made by men and men dominating society. "Apart from discriminatory restrictions of women's fundamental freedoms such as voting, marriages, travel, testifying in court, inheriting and owning property and obtaining custody of children women find that their access to education, employment, health care and even food is limited because of their gender. Domestic violence

affects women in every country in the world. According to the International Labor Organization, women work almost double the time in the world than men, and they hold not even one-tenth of the property as against men."(ibid)

In the Global Gender Gap Index 2009, out of the 134 countries India is at the 114th position covered in the index. (The World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Index, 2009). Gender discrimination has become a curse for the women, which prevent them from attaining desirable development and progress. In a male dominated society they have to struggle hard to come to the fore front. Gender based discrimination is a stumbling block on the way of the development of the women. A vast majority of Indian women work throughout their lives but the fact is that it is not officially recognized. Statistics on work force shows low figure of women workers.

The Human Development Report of Odisha, 2003, in one of its chapter entitled Women: Striving in an Unequal World "stated that the position of women in Odisha is no different from that of women in other region of the country. In fact, in some respects, women in Odisha are even more disadvantaged. Regarded as the 'second sex' and usually as not distinct from the families that they belong to, women have to face many challenges and hardships. Poverty, violence and lack of political participation have been identified as issues of special concern to South Asian women, and Odisha is no exception" (HDR, Odisha, 2003)

The system of dowry also highlights the status of women in the society. According to the report of Crime Record Bureau there was 8083 dowry death cases registered in India in the year 2013. In Odisha 113 dowry death cases were registered in 2013. Gender disparity in the sphere of education is another matter of concern, despite of a number steps taken by the government the status of women education is lagging behind men.

According to a 1998 report by U.S. Department of Commerce, the chief barrier to female education in India are inadequate school facilities (such as sanitary facilities), shortage of female teachers and gender bias in curriculum (majority of the female characters being depicted as weak and helpless). "Illiteracy restricts one's capacity to give thoughtful judgment on issues of importance. Education facilitates the development of a progressive attitude in individuals towards social and economic problems."

According to the census report 778,454,120 persons are literate in the country. The literacy rate of the country is 74.04. In India 444,203,762 males are literate with a literacy rate of 82.14%. On the other hand only 334,250,358 females are literate. The literacy rate of women in 20011 was 65.46%. In Odisha the literacy rate in total was 73.45%, the male literacy rate was 82.40% and the female literacy rate was 64.36%.

Crime against women is another serious issue of concern. According to the National Crime Record Bureau Report 2014, a total of 3,37,922 cases of violence against women were registered in India including 36,725 cases of rape, 82,235 cases of molestation, 57,311 cases of kidnapping, 8,455 cases of dowry deaths and 1,22,887 cases of torture. According to the latest report of the National Crime Record Bureau total 105 cases of rape reported in Odisha in 2014. National Crime Records Bureau's (NCRB) latest statistics revealed that Odisha has become one of most vulnerable places in the country in terms of crime against woman after Rajasthan and Assam. According to the latest NCRB

figures, the rate of crime against women in Odisha was the fourth highest in the country in 2014.

Socio-economic indicators are reflecting status of women in modern society. Indicators such as education, health, employment, land and legal rights etc are very important to empower any section of society, A person or group as much achieve the high level of these indicators believed to be empowered accordingly.

According to Nobel Prize winner Dr. Amartya Sen, "Social opportunities refer to the arrangements that society makes for education, healthcare and so on, which influence the individuals' substantive freedom to live better. These facilities are important not only for the conduct of private lives (such as living a healthy life and avoiding morbidity and premature mortality), but also for more effective participation in economic and political activities."

Women Empowerment

Women empowerment means strengthening the condition of women -socially, politically, economically and legally. It means equal opportunity in all walks of life to develop their potentialities. It also means to enlarge their choices for their own development. Empowerment generally refers to increasing the socio-economic, political, religious status of individuals and communities.

"Empowerment is a continuous process for realizing the ideals of equality, human liberation and freedom for all". Women empowerment can be regarded as a process of making women self reliant, self sufficient, independent and capable of taking decisions for their own development. Women empowerment also means providing equal opportunity to women in all walks of life social, economic, political, religious etc. "Women empowerment implies equality of opportunity and equality between genders, ethnic groups, social classes and age groups, strengthening of life chances, collective participation in different spheres of life-cultural, social, political, economic, development process, decision making etc." (ibid, p 15) Thus the scope of women empowerment is very vast in nature. It includes all the efforts and initiatives which aim at all round development of women. Women empowerment has become an important issue of discussion all over the world.

After independence there have a series of conscious initiatives to improve the status of women. A number of affirmative action has been taken by the government to change the position of the women from inequality to that of equality. Both the Central and state governments have enacted different laws for women empowerment apart from setting up commissions to study the status of the women. The constitution of India provides equal status of equality to women with men. Thus legally, both women and men are equal in India. Women are free to take decisions for their own development. They are free to choose any form of education according to their preference to build their own carrier. But in reality there exist a big difference between theory and practice. The social reality is something different so far as the status of women is considered in the society. Only a few urban women are able to enjoy the fruits of constitutional and legal provisions related to equality, right, liberty and justice. Despite of the constitutional and legal provisions gender bias is still prevalent in most of the societies in our country. Although equality of status has been guaranteed to the women by the constitution, it is very

unfortunate that they are still facing discrimination in the society.

Importance of Media in women Empowerment:

Media plays an important role in a democratic country. It is regarded as the fourth pillar of democracy. In the process of women empowerment media can play a very effective role by highlighting the issues of women. In 2001, the Ministry of Women and Child Development published a policy document, National Policy for Empowerment of Women, The policy document stressed on the role of the media in the process of women empowerment. Recognizing the significance of mass media the policy document states that "Media will be used to portray images consistent with human dignity of girls and women". The media is considered an important agent of power. Media plays an important part in the struggle for women's empowerment.

Language newspapers can • play important role in setting agenda of the people. A number of researchers (Smith, 1987) [5] have found close correlation between the coverage of a particular issue by the news papers and peoples' perception on the importance of that issue. Agenda setting theory is basically a theory of strong media effects which suggests that with the passage of time the media agenda becomes the public agenda. According to Agenda Setting theory if a news item is covered frequently and prominently the audience will regard the issue as more important. "Press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling readers what to think about"

Odia newspapers as an agent of mass media can be very effective in this regard since it occupies a position of special privilege and eminence in the state, and its audience is substantially larger than, that of the English or Hindi Newspapers. The Odia newspapers can play a dominant role in setting women issues as public agenda by covering them on the front page since front page news are generally regarded as important news or issues.

It can create awareness among the people against Social evils like Dowry system, Civil Marriage, Witch hunting etc. Odia newspapers can be an effective instrument to break the orthodox thinking by creating a scientific temper among the people.

The process of women empowerment also demands development journalism on the part of the press. A number of legislative measures have been taken by the government to accelerate the process of women empowerment. It can create a healthy public opinion regarding the needs and means of women empowerment.

Talking about the Problems and Prospects of Small Newspapers on August 13, 2005 at Press Club Kolkata, Chairperson Press Council of India, Justice G.N. Ray, said, "To the founder of Indian Language Journalism also goes the credit for the close affinity that the small press of today enjoys with the public to which it caters. Freedom struggle apart, the role that small and medium newspapers have played since 1947 is also commendable. The majority of Indian population today lives in rural areas. The need for flow of information to and from the rural area is even greater. The large and better known papers are mostly published from large cities and towns, not fully aware of the needs and problems of the rural or small town public or of the local taste. Conversely, the small newspapers enjoy the potential to bridge this gap as though they are brought out

by people with small means, it also translates into small overhead costs. They speak the language of the locals and are thus capable of influencing their opinion. They also have the potential to serve as a conduit between the public and the local authorities by bringing to the notice of the authorities, the sufferings, difficulties and the needs of the people, simultaneously carrying to the people the type of information they need from the authorities”.

It can create a platform where the government, NGO'S and others social organization can play their role in the process of women empowerment. It can act as a channel of communication between people, Government, NGO'S and other Social organization. Press has a responsibility in providing a voice to the vulnerable groups but all these are not possible without introducing certain changes in favour of development reporting.

Media interventions can alter gender norms and promote women's empowerment?

Public awareness campaign through newspapers can be effective for altering attitudes towards gender norms. A number of researchers have proved that mass media can inject new ideas among the people. A unique feature of the Odia language press is the practice of publishing special supplements during special occasions or festivals such as Raja Parba, Rathayatra and Durga Puja etc.

The special supplement carries shorts stories, poem, and creative writings etc. These newspapers are closely related to the culture and feelings of the people. Odia newspapers have been able to create an emotional bond with the people of Odisha. It is one of the prominent medium for disseminating information and knowledge on different subjects to the majority of population in Odisha. Since Odia news papers occupy important place in Odisha, as one of the important media of receiving information, it can serve very effectively in disseminating information on education, nutrition, health etc.

Generally, women's problems do not find a place on the front page of a newspaper unless it is a related to crime or a case of rape. Front page is regarded as the most important page of every newspaper. All major stories are placed on the front page. Front page is basically dominated by male. Newspapers even on women's page does not usually address relevant issues for women empowerment but reporting is concerned with beauty tips recipes, fashion syndrome etc.

The Odia news papers can play a very pivotal role in highlighting the problems faced by women as the readership of Odia news papers in Odisha is more than the English and Hindi news papers. It can throw light on the socio-economic and political status of women. It can also play an important role in influencing the policy makers.

It is well recognized by several researchers that the process of women empowerment demands equal treatment and coverage by the media. Therefore in this context the role of press becomes very important to inform educate and empower the women by setting certain roles. News papers are expected to fulfill its democratic functions by setting up certain standard. Odia news papers can play an effective role in creating public opinion on women empowerment issues by covering them on front page. It can mobilize public opinion on different aspects of women's empowerment. It can be very effective in generating public opinion by disseminating the issues of gender inequality, and role of women in development process etc. Government has taken a

number of initiatives to eradicate women illiterate but still remaining due to the presence of orthodox attitude the literacy rate is low among the female in our country. It has the power to influence the attitude of the people which should be utilized to create positive attitude toward women. However, the reality is something different. Journalists and mass media practitioners have to take a pledge for speaking out to root out gender inequality.

If the Regional language press works in collaboration with local NGOs and government agencies, it can have a decisive impact in ending violence against women and ensuring women's empowerment in the truest sense of the term. When there is no violence, in whatsoever manifestations, heaven on earth would not be far away.

Odia newspapers which wields immense power in the state - a power which, is only expanding and not diminishing, needs carrying out a focused attention about women related issues and the portrayal of women. It can play a salutary and a liberating role to give to the women the distinctive and the exclusive space, which must belong to them to enable them, get equal status in the society.

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