

## Empowering Women Through Education: A Historical Analysis Of Colonial Odisha (1803-1947)

**Santa Mahalik**

Ph.D. Scholar Department of History & Archaeology Fakir Mohan University Vyasa Vihar, Balasore, Odisha, India Email: [santadasmpil@gmail.com](mailto:santadasmpil@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

*The growth of education in Odisha during the colonial period (1803-1947) laid the foundation for the social and political empowerment of women in the region. This research paper examines the historical trajectory of women's education during British rule, highlighting the impact of colonial policies and the challenges women faced in accessing education. Initially, British education policy in Odisha focused on administrative convenience rather than social transformation, with minimal efforts to include women in the educational system. The conservative cultural norms of Odisha, combined with British apathy toward women's education, hindered early progress.*

*However, education emerged as a key instrument of women's empowerment, even in the face of adversity. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, missionary efforts and later government reforms began to open doors for women's education, though the primary aim of missionary involvement was religious conversion. Women who received education gained not only literacy but also the means to challenge patriarchal structures, access new opportunities in public life, and contribute to political movements, including India's freedom struggle.*

*The post-colonial era witnessed a more focused effort to improve women's education, leading to higher literacy rates and greater participation of women in various fields. Education became a tool for fostering political consciousness among women, particularly in rural Odisha, where reservation policies further enhanced their roles in governance. Despite these advancements, challenges remain, including the urban-rural divide in access to education and persistent gender disparities in higher education.*

*This paper argues that education is essential for the all-around development of women, serving as a catalyst for both social change and economic progress. By providing women unrestricted access to educational resources, societies can achieve more inclusive and sustainable growth. Amidst the oppressive shadows of colonial rule, women in Odisha emerged as powerful agents of change, fuelled by the transformative power of education. This paper explores their journey toward empowerment from 1803 to 1947, illuminating their pivotal role in the freedom struggle and the quest for equality. The findings of this research underscore the importance of continued efforts to address barriers to women's education in Odisha and beyond.*

**Keywords:** Women's Education, Colonial Odisha, British Education Policies, Social Empowerment, Political Empowerment, Missionary Influence, Gender Disparities, Literacy and Education, Freedom

*Struggle, Cultural Norms, Patriarchy, Rural-Urban Divide, Reservation Policies, Educational Reforms, Women's Participation, Social Change, Economic Progress, Political Consciousness, Inclusivity in Education, Women's Rights.*

## 1. Introduction:

The history of women's empowerment in India is closely intertwined with the growth of education. Throughout the country's past, education has been a powerful tool for social change, especially in challenging the deeply rooted systems of patriarchy and caste that constrained women's roles in society. In Odisha, during the colonial period (1803-1947), the impact of education on women's lives was profound, gradually empowering them socially, economically, and politically. The topic of "Empowering Women Through Education: A Historical Analysis of Colonial Odisha (1803-1947)" explores into this transformative phase of Odisha's history when women began to access education and, in doing so, opened the doors to greater participation in public life, eventually becoming significant contributors to the freedom movement.

Before the advent of British rule in Odisha, the region was characterized by traditional socio-religious systems that strictly limited women's access to education. Patriarchal norms transferred women to domestic roles, often confining them within the walls of their homes. Formal education was an exclusive privilege for men, and societal expectations placed women in subordinate roles, barring them from any meaningful engagement in public affairs. This resulted in a vast majority of women being illiterate and unaware of their rights and potential.

With the British annexation of Odisha in 1803, a new phase of education began, though slowly and primarily aimed at serving the colonial administrative machinery. The British were primarily interested in creating a class of English-educated Indians to assist in clerical and administrative roles. The introduction of modern education, including English language instruction, provided an initial opening for a small section of the population, but it was neither widespread nor focused on empowering the local populace, particularly women. However, even within these limitations, the introduction of formal education laid the foundation for future advancements, allowing women to begin accessing education, although in limited numbers.

This period also saw the rise of Christian missionaries in Odisha, who played a significant role in introducing education to girls. The primary motive of the missionaries was to propagate Christian values, but they also established schools that provided basic literacy to women, creating early opportunities for education in the region. Although initially resisted by conservative elements in society, these efforts began to bear fruit over time, as educated women became aware of their rights and started challenging the socio-cultural norms that had previously kept them dominated.

The growth of education during the colonial period was a critical factor in the empowerment of women in Odisha. Although the British initially introduced education for their own administrative convenience, it eventually became a powerful tool for social and political change. Education allowed women to break free from traditional gender roles, gain economic independence, and participate in political movements such as the Paika Rebellion and the freedom struggle.

As more women accessed education, they became aware of their rights and began to challenge the

patriarchal structures that had long kept them conquered. This social and political empowerment not only improved the status of women in Odisha but also laid the groundwork for future generations of women to continue fighting for equality and justice. The legacy of women's education during the colonial period continues to influence contemporary efforts toward women's empowerment in Odisha, making it a vital area of study in understanding the broader history of gender equality in the region.

## 2. Growth of Women's Education in Odisha During the Colonial Period

The role of women in society, particularly in the context of education, has been a crucial factor in the social, economic, and political development of any nation. Education acts as a key to opening doors for empowerment, self-awareness, and self-confidence. It is not merely an intellectual endeavor; it allows individuals to make informed decisions and negotiate their positions in society from a position of strength. For women, especially in Odisha during the colonial period, education was not only a tool for personal growth but also a vehicle for overcoming the socio-economic, cultural, and gender discriminations they faced. The colonial period in India, marked by British rule, saw both an interruption and a gradual progression in the education of women in Odisha. Despite being restricted to elite classes initially, the growth of education eventually opened doors for a broader segment of women, fostering early movements of empowerment that would pave the way for their future roles in independent India.

### 2.1. Women's Education in Pre-Colonial Odisha

In ancient Odisha, education was largely religious and informal. Women had limited access to formal education, which was more prevalent among the higher classes. The traditional system of learning through *pathshalas* (for Hindus) and *madrassas* (for Muslims) did not cater to women in a significant way. Instead, women from higher castes received domestic education at home, primarily aimed at making them good wives and mothers. The beginning of the British era, however, marked a turning point in the history of women's education, bringing about structural changes that began to impact both men and women.

### 2.2. British Influence on Women's Education in Odisha

The British East India Company was initially uninterested in spreading education in India, let alone women's education. Their primary focus was on trade and profit-making. However, the missionaries, particularly Christian missionaries, played a crucial role in introducing modern education to Odisha, including the education of women. The missionaries translated religious texts into Odia, and in the process, they laid the groundwork for the development of a modern education system.

In 1836, the British administration established the first English school in Puri, and by 1853, similar schools had been established in Balasore and Cuttack. These schools, however, were primarily meant to educate a small group of elites who could serve as intermediaries between the British rulers and the Indian population. Women's participation in these early educational institutions was limited, as societal norms and religious traditions often restricted their access.

### 2.3. Key Milestones in Women's Education during the Colonial Era

One of the most significant efforts to promote women's education came from the Indian Education Commission of 1882, which recognized that female education was in an "extremely backward condition" and required government intervention. The Commission recommended that female

education receive greater attention and funding, leading to a gradual increase in the number of girls' schools and the inclusion of women in the teaching profession. By the end of the 19th century, various communities, particularly the Brahmo Samaj and Christian missionaries, contributed to the spread of girls' education.

During this period, notable efforts like Annie Besant's establishment of the Central Hindu Girls School in Banaras in 1894 and the foundation of Lady Hardinge Medical College in Delhi in 1916 marked significant strides towards the empowerment of women through education. In Odisha, however, the pace of development in women's education was slower compared to other parts of India due to the region's economic backwardness and traditional societal structures.

### **2.3.1. Impact of Macaulay's Educational Policy on Odisha**

Lord Macaulay's 1835 education policy sought to establish English as the medium of instruction in India, with a focus on creating a class of English-educated Indians who could serve in subordinate roles in the British administration. In Odisha, this policy influenced the growth of English education, but women's participation remained minimal. The policy did not directly aim at empowering women, but the emphasis on English as a medium of instruction eventually led to the establishment of English schools, where some upper-class women began to receive education.

By 1849, educational efforts had led to the opening of Bethune School, one of the first schools for girls in India, although it was far from Odisha. In Odisha, English schools such as the Cuttack Zilla School and Balasore Zilla School started admitting girls, though in small numbers. These schools laid the foundation for women's education, slowly dismantling the traditional barriers that had prevented women from accessing formal learning.

### **2.3.2. Wood's Despatch and the Spread of Education in Odisha**

A major shift came with the introduction of Wood's Despatch in 1854, often referred to as the "Magna Carta" of education in India. This policy recommended a systematic structure for the spread of education, including women's education, and emphasized vernacular languages at the primary level and English for higher education. In Odisha, this led to the establishment of more schools in rural and urban areas. The number of schools increased from 30 in 1858-59 to 95 in 1870. Schools in Bhadrak, Balasore, Mahanga, and other districts contributed to the spread of primary and secondary education.

Wood's Despatch also highlighted the need to promote female education as part of the overall educational policy, which led to the establishment of separate girls' schools and scholarships for female students. While this did not immediately lead to widespread access to education for women, it did set the groundwork for further developments in the early 20th century.

### **2.3.3. The Hunter Commission and Its Influence**

The Hunter Commission, established under Lord Ripon in 1882, recommended that primary education be made more accessible to women and other marginalized groups. It also emphasized the importance of vocational education, which could help women become financially independent. In Odisha, this led to the opening of private schools and vocational training centers for women, which helped temporary a sense of empowerment among them.

The establishment of institutions like the Satyavadi Bakula Vanavidyalaya at Sakshigopal by Pandit

Gopabandhu Das in 1909 was a significant milestone in the history of women's education in Odisha. This institution, although primarily focused on male students, encouraged the inclusion of women in its educational activities, marking a shift in societal attitudes towards women's education.

#### **2.3.4. Development of Higher and Technical Education for Women**

Higher education for women in Odisha began to take shape with the establishment of Ravenshaw College in Cuttack in 1868. Initially, this institution catered mostly to men, but by the early 20th century, women began to be admitted in small numbers. The establishment of SB Women's College in Cuttack in the late colonial period provided an exclusive space for women to pursue higher education.

Technical education also made its mark in Odisha with the opening of the Odisha School of Engineering in Cuttack in 1923. Although initially focused on male students, women gradually began to participate in technical education, contributing to the expansion of their career opportunities beyond traditional roles.

### **3. Issues and Inadequacies**

Despite these advancements, women's education during the colonial period in Odisha faced numerous challenges. The societal stigma attached to educated women, combined with the economic constraints of many families, meant that most girls received only a rudimentary education. Education for women was often limited to the upper classes, leaving the majority of rural and lower-class women without access to formal schooling.

Moreover, the colonial administration's primary objective was not the empowerment of women or the masses, but rather the creation of a class of educated elites to assist in governance. As a result, the expansion of education for women was often secondary to other political and economic concerns.

### **4. Need of Education for Women Empowerment**

Education is the cornerstone of any society's development, and its role in empowering women is indisputable. In a patriarchal society like India, where women have historically been subjected to oppression, marginalization, and lack of opportunities, education has emerged as a powerful tool to dismantle these barriers. Women's empowerment, both socially and politically, has been fundamentally linked to their access to education. In the case of Odisha, a state with a rich cultural heritage, the role of education in empowering women is especially profound. Odisha has witnessed remarkable women in various spheres, from social reform to political consciousness, and education has played a central role in these achievements.

Odisha's contribution to women's empowerment through education is evident in the lives of pioneering women reformers, activists, and political leaders. The state's social fabric, influenced by its historical and cultural diversity, has seen the gradual rise of women, particularly in the colonial and post-colonial periods. Although women in Odisha, especially those from rural and tribal communities, have faced numerous obstacles in accessing education, the positive strides made over the years have nurtured political consciousness, self-reliance, and social empowerment.

#### **4.1. Women Empowerment and Education**



The concept of women empowerment is not limited to economic independence but extends to the ability of women to exercise their rights, participate actively in decision-making processes, and engage with political institutions. Education is a key enabler of this empowerment. By providing women with knowledge and skills, education enhances their ability to contribute to the workforce, make informed decisions, and assert their rights within familial and societal frameworks. Furthermore, education increases awareness of legal rights, health, and governance, laying the foundation for women's active participation in the political sphere.

Women's empowerment in India has been a multi-faceted process, with education being the driving force behind social and political progress. In Odisha, women have historically been bound by traditional norms that limited their participation in public life. However, with the advent of education, many of these limitations were dismantled. Education not only gave women the tools to seek employment and economic independence but also raised a sense of individual identity, enabling them to challenge patriarchal norms.

#### **4.2. The Need for Education for Women Empowerment in Odisha**

Despite the progress, many women in Odisha, particularly in rural and tribal regions, continue to face gender disparities in education. The literacy rate among women in Odisha has been historically lower than the national average, reflecting the deep-rooted societal biases that prioritize male education. However, the push for educational reform and the efforts of social activists have contributed to a steady increase in the number of women accessing education over the years.

Education for women is not just about literacy; it encompasses knowledge about health, rights, economic independence, and political participation. In the rural regions of Odisha, where caste and class dynamics play a significant role in determining access to resources, education is a transformative force. It allows women to breakdown free from the confines of traditional roles and empowers them to participate in social and political processes. This is especially important in tribal communities where women often bear the brunt of socio-economic hardships.

The need for education is evident in the numerous challenges faced by women in Odisha, including gender-based violence, lack of representation in political bodies, and restricted access to healthcare. Education equips women with the knowledge to understand their rights and the confidence to fight for them. It also plays a critical role in altering perceptions, both within the family and society, regarding women's capabilities and contributions.

#### **4.3. Impact of Education on Social Empowerment**

In Odisha, education has been instrumental in changing the social landscape for women. Over the years, educated women have emerged as leaders in various sectors, from social reform to healthcare. Historically, the role of women like Rama Devi Choudhury and Sarala Devi, who were at the forefront of the freedom struggle and social reform, exemplifies the transformative power of education. These women, with their education and exposure to progressive ideas, were able to challenge the status quo and work towards improving the conditions of women in society.

Education has also played a critical role in enhancing women's participation in community development initiatives in Odisha. Through programs focusing on adult education and vocational training, women have been able to contribute to their families' income, thus improving their social

standing within the household.

The role of women in managing household finances has also evolved with education. Women, once confined to domestic roles, are now active participants in decision-making processes concerning household investments, children's education, and healthcare. This shift not only improves the quality of life within households but also empowers women to challenge traditional gender norms.

#### **4.4. Political Empowerment through Education**

The political landscape in Odisha has also seen the influence of educated women. Historically, the participation of women in politics has been limited due to gender biases and social norms that view politics as a male domain. However, education has played a vital role in breaking this barrier and encouraging women to take active roles in governance and decision-making.

#### **4.5. Growth of Political Consciousness Among Women**

Alongside social empowerment, education also played a pivotal role in development political awareness among women in Odisha. By the early 20th century, educated women began to recognize the importance of political participation as a means to secure broader rights and freedoms. The spread of nationalist ideas, facilitated by access to education, brought women into contact with ideas of self-rule, independence, and anti-colonial resistance.

Education gave women the tools to articulate their grievances and organize protests against British policies. It also allowed them to connect with the broader Indian freedom movement. Women in Odisha, like elsewhere in India, began participating in nationalist organizations such as the Indian National Congress and engaged in political discourse, which was previously dominated by men. Their education equipped them with the knowledge and confidence to participate actively in discussions about independence, women's rights, and social reforms.

#### **4.6. Women's Participation in the Freedom Struggle: The tale of Paika Rebellion**

One of the most notable examples of women's political consciousness in Odisha is their participation in the Paika Rebellion of 1817, one of the earliest armed revolts against British colonial rule. Although primarily led by the Paikas, a warrior class in Khordha, the rebellion saw significant involvement from the local population, including women. The Paika Rebellion, often considered a precursor to India's freedom struggle, arose due to British policies that undermined the traditional rights and livelihoods of the Paikas, particularly in land ownership.

The role of women in the Paika Rebellion highlights the nascent political consciousness that education, both formal and informal, began to cultivate among women. While women's participation in the rebellion is not widely documented, their contributions as supporters, protectors, and even fighters cannot be overlooked. Educated women, or those exposed to political ideas through informal education, played key roles in organizing resources, sheltering rebels, and maintaining communication networks. These women understood the importance of resisting colonial oppression, and their involvement in the rebellion demonstrated a growing awareness of their role in the political landscape.

As education spread, so did women's participation in subsequent nationalist movements in Odisha. By the time of the Non-Cooperation Movement and the Quit India Movement in the 20th century, many educated Odia women actively engaged in protests, boycotts, and the dissemination of nationalist

ideas. Their education gave them the ability to lead and influence others, positioning them as crucial players in the struggle for independence.

#### **4.7. Education and the Rise of Women Leaders in Odisha**

The increasing accessibility of education also paved the way for the emergence of women leaders in Odisha's political and social spheres. Women like Rama Devi Choudhury, a prominent Gandhian and freedom fighter, exemplified how education could empower women to lead movements and contribute to the national cause. Rama Devi, along with other women leaders like Malati Choudhury and Annapurna Maharana, played vital roles in mobilizing women for the nationalist cause in Odisha.

These women, educated and inspired by the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi, led peaceful protests, organized boycotts of British goods, and advocated for social reforms such as the abolition of untouchability and the promotion of rural education. Their educational backgrounds equipped them with the necessary skills to engage with political leaders, negotiate with authorities, and inspire other women to join the freedom movement. The role of education in creating such leaders underscores its significance in encouragement both social and political empowerment.

Educated women in Odisha have also been more vocal about their rights and the need for political representation. The rise of leaders like Pramila Devi and others in the state's political arena highlights how education fosters political consciousness among women. These women leaders have not only advocated for gender equality but have also worked towards improving the socio-economic conditions of women in their constituencies.

The need for education in empowering women in Odisha cannot be overstated. As seen through the rise of women leaders, social reformers, and political activists, education has been the key to unlocking the potential of women in the state. It has allowed them to challenge societal norms, become economically independent, and participate in political processes. While challenges remain, particularly in rural and tribal areas, the progress made so far demonstrates the transformative power of education. Continued efforts to improve access to education for women will undoubtedly lead to further social empowerment and political consciousness, helping Odisha move towards a more equitable society.

### **5. Findings and Discussion**

The educational landscape of Odisha during the British colonial period paints a complex picture of neglect, deliberate policies of control, and an overall lack of interest in the development of the region's educational infrastructure. The British, despite having introduced modern education, did little to promote higher learning or encourage holistic development among the people of Odisha. The key factors that shaped the education system in Odisha under British rule include economic motives, religious agendas, and the colonial need to create a subservient clerical class. These factors, combined with the societal resistance and deep-rooted cultural conservatism, delayed the rise of an educated elite class in Odisha. This section delves into the findings drawn from both historical data and contemporary scholarship on the impact of colonial education policies on Odisha, particularly in relation to women's education and empowerment.

#### **5.1. Findings**

##### **5.1.1. Slow Progress of Modern Education in Odisha**



Although the British initiated modern education in Odisha, its progress was slow compared to other regions like Bengal, Madras, and Bombay. Odisha was largely neglected, and its education system lagged due to several reasons, including geographical isolation, socio-political factors, and the British government's apathy towards the region. One major finding is that Odisha's late exposure to English education delayed the emergence of a strong intellectual class, which was a critical factor in the socio-political empowerment of other regions in India. The British were more interested in exploiting Odisha's resources than in uplifting its population through education.

#### **5.1.2. British Apathy Towards Higher Education in Odisha**

The British colonial administration had a commercial interest in Odisha, driven by its rich natural resources, rather than the upliftment of the local population. This commercial motivation was evident in the lack of investment in higher education institutions. Unlike in Bengal or Bombay, where universities were established relatively early, Odisha remained without a single college when the Universities of Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras were established in 1858. This gap in higher education opportunities contributed to Odisha's delayed socio-economic and political development, hindering the rise of an educated elite that could lead the state in various sectors, including politics, business, and social reform.

#### **5.1.3. Focus on Creating a Clerical Class**

Another significant finding is the British policy of limiting education in Odisha to the creation of a clerical class. The British aimed to produce a workforce that could assist in the administration of the colony but did not wish to encourage higher education that could lead to political awakening or challenge British authority. They sought individuals with a working knowledge of English who could act as intermediaries between the government and the native population. This strategy, designed to serve British administrative needs, severely restricted the intellectual and political empowerment of the Odia people, particularly women.

#### **5.1.4. Limited Access to Schools and Colleges**

The number of schools and colleges in Odisha during the British period was grossly insufficient. The scarcity of educational institutions, particularly those offering higher education, meant that access to education was highly restricted, especially for women and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The delay in establishing educational institutions contributed to Odisha's slower socio-political development. The lack of educational infrastructure also perpetuated gender disparities, as women had even fewer opportunities to receive formal education. This limited the potential for women's empowerment through education, which could have led to greater social and political participation.

#### **5.1.5. Missionary Influence on Education**

The role of Christian missionaries in spreading English education in Odisha cannot be overlooked. While the missionaries were primarily motivated by the desire to convert the local population to Christianity, they also played a role in introducing modern education, particularly through the translation of religious texts like the Bible into Odia. Missionaries like William Carey and his associates translated the Bible and other Christian literature into Odia, using the education system as a tool for evangelization. However, their efforts were not entirely focused on holistic educational development but rather on religious conversion, limiting the impact of their work on broader educational advancement.

#### **5.1.6. Conservatism in Odia Society**

The conservative mindset of Odia society, particularly regarding women's education, was another factor that hindered educational progress during the colonial period. Odia society, deeply rooted in tradition, was resistant to the idea of English education, especially for women. This resistance was exploited by the British, who did little to challenge these societal norms. The British found it convenient to allow such conservatism to persist, as it aligned with their goal of preventing the emergence of a politically and socially conscious population. This conservatism further delayed the empowerment of women through education in Odisha.

#### **5.1.7. Neglect of Technical and Professional Education**

The British also neglected the development of technical and professional education in Odisha. Despite the state's heavy reliance on agriculture, no significant efforts were made to introduce agricultural education or engineering programs that could benefit the region's agrarian population. The lack of focus on technical education limited the scope for economic development in Odisha and restricted opportunities for women to engage in professions that could have empowered them economically and socially. Technical education could have provided women with skills that would enable them to participate in the workforce and contribute to the region's development.

#### **5.1.8. Barriers to Women's Education and Empowerment**

The colonial education system left a legacy of gender disparity that continues to affect women's access to education in Odisha. Despite various government initiatives to promote girls' education, including scholarships and the establishment of girls' schools, many barriers persist. These barriers include socio-economic challenges, cultural norms that prioritize male education, and the lack of infrastructure in rural areas. Addressing these barriers is crucial for empowering women and enabling them to participate fully in the state's social and political life.

### **5.2. Discussion**

The findings highlight the complex interplay between colonial policies, societal norms, and the role of education in shaping women's empowerment in Odisha. The British colonial administration's focus on creating a clerical class, combined with the neglect of higher education and technical training, severely limited the potential for educational and political empowerment among Odia women. Moreover, the conservative nature of Odia society at the time meant that women's education was not a priority, further delaying their participation in public life.

One of the key issues discussed is the British strategy of using education as a tool to maintain control over the Indian population rather than to empower it. This is particularly evident in their reluctance to invest in higher education, which could have led to the rise of an intellectual class capable of challenging colonial authority. The British did not encourage the development of technical or professional education, which could have enabled economic independence and social mobility for the Odia population, including women.

The role of Christian missionaries in spreading education is a nuanced one. While they introduced modern educational methods, their primary aim was religious conversion rather than the holistic development of the local population. This limited the long-term impact of their efforts on women's

education and empowerment in Odisha.

The current education system in Odisha, though significantly improved, still bears the marks of its colonial past. Many of the barriers that existed during the British period, such as inadequate access to education and gender disparities, persist to this day. However, there is growing awareness of the need to address these issues through targeted policies and initiatives that promote inclusivity, particularly in rural and tribal areas.

## 6. Conclusion

The study of the growth of education and its role in women's empowerment in Odisha during the colonial period reveals the complex interplay between colonial motives, indigenous culture, and socio-political factors. Although the British introduced modern education in Odisha, their objectives were largely commercial and administrative. The colonial government prioritized the creation of a class of English-speaking clerks and intermediaries over the education of the broader populace, particularly women. This resulted in slow educational development in Odisha, with women facing additional barriers due to conservative social norms and limited access to schooling.

Despite these obstacles, education gradually became a critical instrument of empowerment for women in Odisha. Missionary initiatives in the early 19th century laid the groundwork for introducing women to formal education, though their focus was on religious conversion. Over time, government reforms and the tireless efforts of reformers helped to create a more inclusive educational environment, albeit slowly. Educated women in Odisha began to challenge the patriarchal norms that had long kept them confined to domestic roles. They accessed new opportunities in public life, including participation in the workforce and political activism.

One of the key findings of this research is that education played an essential role in fostering political consciousness among women. As women in Odisha gained access to education, they developed a greater awareness of their rights and responsibilities as citizens. This, in turn, allowed them to take on leadership roles in various social and political movements. The introduction of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in post-independence India further enhanced the role of women in local governance, particularly in rural areas. These amendments reserved one-third of seats in local bodies for women, and education enabled women to take advantage of these opportunities.

While the colonial period laid the foundation for women's education in Odisha, it was in the post-colonial period that significant progress was made. The Indian government's focus on educational reforms, especially for marginalized groups, helped to increase literacy rates among women. This growth in education has had a profound impact on the social mobility of women in Odisha, enabling them to break free from traditional roles and become active participants in the development of their communities.

However, challenges remain. The urban-rural divide continues to hinder access to education for women in rural Odisha, where poverty, gender discrimination, and limited infrastructure persist. The dropout rates among girls, particularly at the secondary and higher education levels, remain high due to factors such as early marriage, economic pressures, and inadequate school facilities. Furthermore, women from marginalized communities, such as Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs),

face additional challenges in accessing education due to their social and economic status.

In addressing these challenges, it is essential to recognize that education is not merely a tool for personal development but a vital instrument for societal progress. Empowering women through education benefits not only the individuals themselves but also their families, communities, and the nation as a whole. Educated women are more likely to ensure that their children, especially daughters, also receive an education, creating a positive cycle of empowerment across generations.

In conclusion, the growth of education in Odisha during the colonial period, though slow and fraught with challenges, laid the groundwork for the empowerment of women. Education has proven to be a powerful tool for breaking down social barriers, fostering political awareness, and promoting economic independence among women. As Odisha continues to develop, it is crucial to focus on ensuring equal access to education for all women, particularly those in rural and marginalized communities. By doing so, the state can achieve greater social and economic progress and ensure that women play a central role in shaping its future.

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