

# Gender, Region, and Development: Tracing the Trajectory of Women's Literacy in Post-Independence Western Odisha

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## Abstract

This paper examines the historical trajectory of women's literacy in Western Odisha in the post-Independence period, situating it at the intersection of gender, region, and development. Although post-1947 India positioned education as a central instrument of democratic modernization, regional disparities persisted, particularly in economically marginalized and culturally distinct regions such as Western Odisha. Drawing on Census data, government policy documents, and regional educational initiatives, the study traces the uneven expansion of female literacy from the early decades after Independence to the present. It argues that progress in women's literacy has been shaped not only by state-led programmes such as the National Literacy Mission and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, but also by deeply embedded socio-cultural structures, agrarian vulnerabilities, tribal demographics, and the linguistic distinctiveness of the Sambalpuri-Koshali region.

The analysis foregrounds how caste hierarchies, early marriage, seasonal migration, poverty, patriarchal norms, and infrastructural deficits mediate girls' access, retention, and completion in schooling. At the same time, it highlights the gradual yet significant impact of self-help groups, local activism, welfare schemes, and decentralized governance in expanding educational aspirations and participation. By conceptualizing literacy both as a statistical measure and as a socio-cultural process, the paper moves beyond quantitative growth to interrogate the qualitative dimensions of empowerment, agency, and intergenerational change. Ultimately, it contends that women's literacy in Western Odisha reflects a layered narrative of developmental ambition and structural constraint, revealing both substantive progress and persistent unevenness within India's broader modernization project.

**Keywords:** Women's Literacy; Western Odisha; Gender and Development; Regional Disparities; Post-Independence India

## Introduction

The historical trajectory of Western Odisha in the decades following Indian Independence in 1947 must be read within the wider framework of nation-building, planned development, and uneven regional transformation in India. When the Constitution came into force in 1950, the newly formed Indian republic adopted a centralized planning model that sought to integrate diverse regions into a coherent developmental state. Yet, the spatial distribution of resources and infrastructure remained deeply unequal. Within Odisha—itsself one of the economically less developed states in eastern India—the western belt

comprising districts such as Sambalpur, Bolangir, Kalahandi, and later Bargarh emerged as a region marked by structural disadvantage, agrarian fragility, and infrastructural deficits.

Historically, parts of Western Odisha had been governed under princely states prior to their merger into the Indian Union. Administrative integration after 1947 did not immediately translate into economic modernization. The region's economy remained overwhelmingly agrarian, dependent on monsoon rainfall, subsistence cultivation, and small landholdings. Despite the construction of the Hirakud Dam near Sambalpur in the 1950s—one of independent India's earliest major multipurpose river valley projects—its benefits were unevenly distributed, and irrigation coverage did not uniformly transform rural livelihoods. Districts such as Bolangir and Kalahandi became emblematic of drought-prone vulnerability and chronic poverty in national discourse, particularly during the late twentieth century when reports of starvation deaths drew media attention to the so-called “KBK” (Kalahandi–Bolangir–Koraput) region.

Demographically, Western Odisha has a significant concentration of Scheduled Tribe and Scheduled Caste populations, whose socio-economic marginalization intersects with regional backwardness. Tribal communities such as the Kondh, Binjhal, and Gond inhabit forested and upland tracts, often distant from formal schooling infrastructure. The persistence of shifting cultivation practices, forest-based subsistence, and seasonal migration patterns historically constrained sustained access to formal education. Moreover, entrenched caste hierarchies and patriarchal norms shaped differential access to literacy, particularly for women.

Linguistically and culturally, Western Odisha possesses a distinct identity associated with Sambalpuri or Koshali speech forms, folk performance traditions, and a regional literary culture that has often felt peripheral to the coastal Odia mainstream. While the state language policy consolidated Odia as the official medium, the dialectal difference of Sambalpuri/Koshali contributed to subtle educational disadvantages, especially in early schooling where language unfamiliarity could affect retention and learning outcomes. Cultural distance from the administrative and political centers in coastal Odisha further reinforced perceptions of neglect and underdevelopment.

In terms of literacy, the early Census decades reveal the structural depth of gender disparity. According to data from the 1951 Census of India, female literacy in Odisha was abysmally low, reflecting both colonial educational neglect and entrenched social conservatism. While national female literacy in 1951 stood at approximately 8.86 percent, Odisha's figures were lower, and districts in Western Odisha lagged further behind the state average. Subsequent Census reports in 1961 and 1971 indicate gradual improvement but continued gender gaps, particularly in rural interiors. The expansion of primary schooling under the Community Development Programme and later Five-Year Plans did not immediately overcome barriers such as early marriage, domestic labor burdens, and poverty-induced dropout.

By the 1981 and 1991 Censuses, literacy rates had risen more visibly, yet Western Odisha remained behind coastal districts such as Cuttack and Puri in female literacy attainment. The regional disparity mirrored broader patterns of uneven development within India, where infrastructural concentration, urbanization, and historical access to missionary and colonial education had long favored certain zones over others. In Western Odisha, sparse transport networks, limited secondary schools, and teacher shortages compounded socio-cultural constraints on girls' education.

Thus, in the post-Independence decades, Western Odisha occupied a paradoxical position within the Indian developmental narrative: formally integrated into the planning apparatus of the modern state, yet persistently marked by agrarian vulnerability, tribal marginality, linguistic distinctiveness, and gendered educational deprivation. Establishing this historical baseline is essential for understanding the later

trajectory of women's literacy in the region. The early Census data do not merely register low numerical attainment; they index a structural condition shaped by geography, economy, culture, and policy priorities. Any meaningful analysis of women's literacy in Western Odisha must therefore begin with this layered regional context, in which gender inequity is inseparable from the broader history of postcolonial development and internal differentiation within India.

### **State Policy and Educational Reform: National and Regional Interventions**

The evolution of women-focused educational policy in post-Independence India reflects a gradual but decisive shift from welfare-oriented inclusion to rights-based entitlement. In the early decades after 1947, the Indian state conceptualized education within the framework of planned development under the Five-Year Plans. The First and Second Five-Year Plans emphasized expansion of primary schooling, rural infrastructure, and teacher training, but women's education was treated largely as a subsidiary component of community development. The 1968 National Policy on Education marked the first major attempt to articulate a coherent national vision, yet persistent gender disparities revealed the limits of infrastructural expansion without targeted intervention. By the time of the 1986 National Policy on Education (revised in 1992), women's education had been explicitly recognized as a "critical area of concern," aligning literacy with empowerment, social justice, and national progress.

A major turning point occurred with the launch of the National Literacy Mission in 1988, which aimed to eradicate adult illiteracy among the 15–35 age group, with particular emphasis on women and marginalized communities. The Mission adopted a campaign mode, mobilizing volunteers, civil society actors, and district administrations. In regions such as Western Odisha—especially in districts identified under the KBK (Kalahandi–Bolangir–Koraput) programme—the Total Literacy Campaigns of the 1990s sought to combine functional literacy with awareness of health, sanitation, and rights. While these campaigns generated measurable improvements in literacy rates, their sustainability varied. Seasonal migration, agrarian precarity, and social conservatism often limited retention, and post-literacy follow-up mechanisms remained uneven.

The transition from literacy campaigns to universal elementary education was institutionalized through the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), launched in 2001. SSA aimed at universal enrolment, retention, and bridging gender and social gaps at the elementary level. It expanded school infrastructure, introduced free textbooks for girls, and strengthened mid-day meal schemes to incentivize attendance. In Odisha, SSA implementation included the opening of primary schools in remote tribal habitations and recruitment of para-teachers to address teacher shortages. Western Odisha benefited from residential schooling initiatives such as Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas for girls from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and minority communities. Yet, field studies and district-level data often reveal disparities between enrolment statistics and actual learning outcomes. Dropout rates among adolescent girls—due to early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and limited access to secondary schools—remained significant in districts like Bolangir and Kalahandi.

The constitutionalization of education as a fundamental right through the 86th Amendment (2002) and the subsequent Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009) further strengthened the legal framework. However, structural challenges in Western Odisha—poor road connectivity, dispersed settlements, and socio-economic vulnerability—continued to affect effective implementation. The quantitative expansion of schooling did not automatically translate into qualitative transformation, particularly in regions with entrenched poverty.

In 2015, the Government of India launched the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) campaign, initially targeting districts with adverse child sex ratios but symbolically reinforcing the linkage between the survival, protection, and education of the girl child. Although BBBP functioned more as an advocacy and awareness initiative than a direct schooling programme, its messaging contributed to renewed public discourse on girls' education. In Odisha, convergence efforts between education, health, and women and child development departments sought to address gender bias holistically. Nonetheless, evaluations have indicated that expenditure patterns often prioritized publicity over deep infrastructural intervention, highlighting again the gap between policy intention and grassroots impact.

At the regional level, Odisha introduced context-specific measures such as incentives for girls' secondary education, bicycle distribution schemes to reduce mobility barriers, and targeted hostels for tribal students. The state's Mission Shakti programme, though primarily focused on self-help groups and women's economic empowerment, indirectly supported literacy by enhancing women's participation in community decision-making. In Western Odisha, the presence of active self-help group networks has, in some cases, improved parental attitudes toward girls' schooling. Yet regional disparities persist when compared to coastal districts with stronger educational legacies and urbanization patterns.

Census data from 1991, 2001, and 2011 demonstrate significant improvements in female literacy rates across Odisha, including Western districts. However, the inter-district gap underscores the uneven translation of national policy into regional outcomes. The trajectory reveals a layered pattern: initial post-Independence neglect; campaign-based mobilization in the late twentieth century; rights-based universalization in the early twenty-first century; and gender-sensitive advocacy in the 2010s. Each phase reflects an evolving understanding of literacy not merely as the ability to read and write but as a developmental imperative tied to empowerment, demographic transition, and participatory citizenship.

The case of Western Odisha illustrates that state policy, while indispensable, operates within a matrix of socio-economic structures, cultural practices, and administrative capacity. The distance between policy formulation at the national level and lived experience in drought-prone, tribal-majority districts exposes the complexity of educational reform in a heterogeneous federal polity. Women's literacy in this region thus becomes a critical lens through which to assess the successes and limitations of India's developmental state: a narrative of progressive policy innovation tempered by the realities of regional inequality and implementation constraints.

### **Gendered Structures and Social Constraints**

Caste stratification has historically influenced educational access across rural India. In Western Odisha, Scheduled Caste communities often inhabited segregated hamlets with limited infrastructural connectivity. Although post-Independence affirmative action policies expanded school enrolment, social discrimination, subtle exclusion within classrooms, and economic precarity continued to affect attendance and retention. For girls from these communities, the burden of domestic labor—care work, sibling supervision, fuel and water collection—combined with caste-based marginality to restrict sustained participation in schooling.

The dimension of tribal marginality adds further complexity. Western Odisha contains a significant proportion of Scheduled Tribe populations, including Kondh, Binjhal, Gond, and other communities residing in forested and upland regions. Tribal habitation patterns are frequently dispersed, making access to formal schools physically challenging. Language differences between home environments and Odia-medium instruction have historically produced early learning disadvantages. Although residential schools

and bridge courses were introduced to address this gap, first-generation learners—particularly girls—often confront cultural dissonance between formal schooling and community life. Anthropological and educational studies in tribal belts of Odisha have documented how curriculum content, pedagogical styles, and institutional discipline sometimes fail to align with indigenous knowledge systems, leading to alienation and dropout.

Early marriage remains another decisive factor. Despite legal prohibition under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, social practice in many rural pockets continues to encourage marriage in mid-adolescence. Girls who transition to marital households typically discontinue formal education. Even where enrolment statistics show near parity at the primary level, the sharp decline in female participation at the secondary stage reflects this structural barrier. In economically vulnerable districts such as Bolangir and Kalahandi, early marriage is frequently rationalized as a strategy to reduce perceived economic burden and ensure social security within patriarchal frameworks.

Seasonal migration, driven by agrarian distress, further disrupts educational continuity. Western Odisha has long experienced out-migration of landless and marginal farming households to brick kilns and construction sites in neighboring states. When entire families migrate seasonally, children—especially girls—either accompany parents and miss months of schooling or remain behind in precarious caregiving arrangements. Government attempts to establish seasonal hostels and migration tracking systems have achieved partial success, but discontinuity in schooling remains a persistent concern. Migration-related dropout disproportionately affects girls, whose domestic responsibilities intensify in the absence of adult women.

Poverty operates as an overarching structural constraint. Although elementary education is officially free and supported by incentives such as mid-day meals and textbook distribution, indirect costs—uniforms, examination fees, transport, private tutoring—pose significant barriers for low-income families. In resource-constrained households, boys' education may be prioritized on the assumption of future economic return, while girls' schooling is perceived as secondary. Empirical studies across rural India indicate that gender bias in educational investment persists even when families express normative support for girls' education.

Patriarchal norms underpin and reinforce these material constraints. Social expectations regarding female modesty, mobility, and domesticity influence decisions about school attendance, particularly when secondary schools are located at considerable distance from villages. Concerns about safety, reputation, and sexual harassment often lead parents to withdraw adolescent daughters from schooling. The absence of female teachers and inadequate sanitation facilities in some rural schools further compounds these anxieties. The intersection of gender with region is thus not merely additive but mutually constitutive: rurality intensifies patriarchal control, and gender norms shape how regional disadvantage is experienced. Statistical evidence from successive Census decades and National Sample Survey reports reveals a familiar pattern: gender gaps narrow at the primary level but widen at higher stages of education, particularly in rural and tribal-majority districts. While female literacy rates in Odisha improved substantially between 1991 and 2011, inter-district disparities persist, with western districts often trailing coastal counterparts. The apparent convergence in aggregate literacy figures can obscure qualitative disparities in completion rates, learning outcomes, and transition to secondary and higher education.

Importantly, these constraints do not operate in isolation. A tribal girl from a drought-prone village in Kalahandi, for example, may simultaneously navigate linguistic marginality, economic precarity, caste or tribal discrimination, domestic labor obligations, and early marriage pressure. Gender becomes the axis

through which regional disadvantage is most acutely experienced. Conversely, incremental shifts in one domain—such as the formation of women’s self-help groups or the presence of a residential girls’ hostel—can recalibrate family attitudes and expand educational aspiration.

Thus, the lived realities of women’s literacy in Western Odisha underscore that educational deprivation is not solely a failure of policy delivery but the outcome of layered socio-cultural and economic structures. Access, retention, and completion are shaped by a matrix in which caste hierarchies, tribal marginality, migration economies, poverty, and patriarchal ideology converge. To understand the trajectory of female education in this region is therefore to recognize literacy as a deeply social process, negotiated within households, communities, and local moral economies, rather than merely achieved through institutional provision.

### **Literacy, Empowerment, and the Future of Regional Development**

The expansion of women’s literacy in Western Odisha must ultimately be evaluated not only as a statistical achievement but as a transformative social process embedded within the broader developmental trajectory of India. Literacy, in postcolonial developmental discourse, has consistently been positioned as a foundational capability—central to economic productivity, public health, democratic participation, and gender justice. Yet the lived meaning of literacy in regions such as Western Odisha reveals a complex interplay between incremental empowerment and structural constraint.

From an economic standpoint, rising female literacy has contributed to gradual diversification of livelihood aspirations. While the region remains predominantly agrarian, increased educational attainment among women has expanded access to non-farm employment, including teaching, frontline health work (such as ASHA and Anganwadi services), clerical positions, and participation in micro-enterprises. The growth of self-help groups under state-supported initiatives has demonstrated how functional literacy enhances women’s capacity to manage savings, access credit, maintain records, and engage with banking institutions. Literacy thus strengthens economic agency by facilitating interaction with formal institutions that were previously inaccessible to non-literate rural women.

In the domain of health and social welfare, empirical studies across India consistently demonstrate a positive correlation between female literacy and improved health outcomes. Literate mothers are more likely to access institutional healthcare, understand immunization schedules, adopt family planning measures, and ensure nutritional support for children. In districts of Western Odisha historically marked by high maternal and infant mortality, even modest gains in women’s educational levels have been associated with greater utilization of public health services. Literacy enables comprehension of government welfare entitlements, from food security schemes to maternal benefit programmes, thereby strengthening women’s bargaining power within the household and vis-à-vis the state.

Political participation represents another significant dimension of empowerment. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment (1992), which mandated reservation for women in Panchayati Raj institutions, created new spaces for rural women’s leadership. In Odisha, women’s representation in local governance has been further expanded through enhanced reservation provisions. Literacy enhances the effectiveness of such participation by enabling elected women representatives to read official documents, maintain records, scrutinize budgets, and articulate developmental demands. While proxy representation—where male relatives informally exercise authority—remains a concern in certain areas, increasing educational attainment among women has strengthened their capacity for substantive rather than symbolic participation.

Perhaps the most enduring impact of women's literacy lies in its intergenerational effects. Research across rural India indicates that literate mothers are significantly more likely to prioritize schooling for both sons and daughters, thereby gradually eroding entrenched gender bias. In Western Odisha, first-generation literate women have often emerged as advocates for continued education of their daughters beyond the primary stage. This shift signals a reconfiguration of aspiration within households that were previously circumscribed by subsistence economies and early marriage norms. Literacy, in this sense, operates not merely as individual advancement but as a catalyst for altering familial and community-level expectations. Yet it would be analytically reductive to equate rising literacy rates with comprehensive emancipation. Despite substantial improvements recorded in the 2001 and 2011 Censuses, regional disparities within Odisha persist, with several western districts trailing coastal counterparts in higher education attainment and workforce participation. Moreover, literacy does not automatically dismantle patriarchal authority or eliminate economic precarity. Women may possess basic reading and writing skills while remaining confined to informal labor markets or domestic spheres. The persistence of gender wage gaps, underemployment, and limited mobility underscores the structural limits of literacy as a singular developmental remedy.

The question, therefore, is whether women's literacy in Western Odisha constitutes substantive transformation or reflects uneven modernization within India's broader developmental narrative. On one hand, the trajectory from abysmally low female literacy rates in the early post-Independence decades to significantly improved figures in the twenty-first century represents undeniable progress. Educational access has expanded, gender gaps have narrowed at the elementary level, and women's public visibility has increased. On the other hand, qualitative disparities—learning outcomes, digital literacy, transition to higher education, and secure employment—suggest that empowerment remains stratified along lines of caste, tribe, and class.

In this context, literacy should be understood as a necessary but insufficient condition for regional development. Its transformative potential depends upon complementary investments in secondary education, vocational training, digital infrastructure, healthcare, and livelihood diversification. As India advances toward knowledge-based economic models, regions like Western Odisha face the challenge of translating foundational literacy into higher-order educational attainment and sustainable employment opportunities.

The future of regional development in Western Odisha will thus hinge on whether gains in women's literacy can be consolidated into durable structures of economic and political empowerment. If literacy continues to expand in tandem with institutional reform, infrastructural development, and gender-sensitive governance, it may serve as the cornerstone of a more equitable modernization. If, however, structural inequalities remain unaddressed, literacy risks becoming a symbolic marker of progress rather than a substantive instrument of transformation. The history of women's literacy in this region therefore encapsulates the broader tension within India's postcolonial development: a narrative of remarkable expansion shadowed by persistent unevenness, where empowerment unfolds gradually within the constraints of deeply rooted social hierarchies.

## Conclusion

The foregoing analysis has demonstrated that the trajectory of women's literacy in Western Odisha must be situated within the layered historical, regional, and socio-political landscape of post-Independence India. From the early decades of planned development to the rights-based educational reforms of the

twenty-first century, state policy progressively acknowledged women's education as central to national modernization. Yet the regional realities of Western Odisha—agrarian fragility, tribal concentration, linguistic distinctiveness, infrastructural deficits, and entrenched caste hierarchies within Odisha—produced uneven outcomes. National programmes such as the National Literacy Mission and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan significantly expanded enrolment and improved aggregate literacy figures, but the gap between policy formulation and grassroots implementation persisted. Gendered social constraints—early marriage, seasonal migration, poverty, and patriarchal control over female mobility—continued to shape patterns of access, retention, and completion, revealing literacy as a deeply social and negotiated process rather than a purely administrative achievement.

At the same time, the expansion of female literacy has generated tangible shifts in economic participation, health awareness, political representation, and intergenerational aspiration. Literacy has enabled women to engage with welfare institutions, participate more substantively in local governance, and advocate for their children's education, thereby fostering gradual transformation within households and communities. However, these gains remain uneven across districts and social groups, indicating that literacy alone cannot dissolve structural inequalities embedded in region, caste, and class. The history of women's literacy in Western Odisha thus encapsulates the broader paradox of Indian development: substantial quantitative progress accompanied by qualitative disparities. Its future significance will depend on whether foundational literacy can be consolidated into higher educational attainment, economic security, and sustained gender equity, transforming incremental advancement into durable and regionally inclusive empowerment.

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