International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

Beyond Economic Empowerment: Examining the Political Social and Institutional Dimension of Women's Empowerment in Odisha

Alima Munda

Independent Research Scholar, Lecturer in Political Science, Narasinghpur College Narasinghpur, Kataka

Abstract:
Odisha is often depicted as a model of women's empowerment, largely because of Mission Shakti, a self-help group (SHG) movement that employs over 70 million women, and the 50% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). This article raises the question of whether these achievements go beyond economic inclusion. Using Kabeer's resources agency achievements model, it conducts an organised desk-based assessment of journal literature, an official evaluation, national survey data, legislative profiles, and court records across four dimensions: economic, political, social, and institutional. Numerical growth outpaces meaningful change, according to a recurrent pattern in the review. At least half of local government seats are held by women, but proxy practices (also referred to as 'sarpanch-patism') weaken their power; SHGs have better access to credit but have less of an impact on asset creation; the institutional architecture is disjointed and susceptible to political instrumentalization; survey data shows that early marriage and gender-based violence continue to occur; and women's representation in the State Assembly has decreased to seven percent. In addition to outlining a seven-point agenda that addresses political capacity-building, enforcement against proxy representation, SHG federations as civic forums, asset-oriented livelihoods, and gender-disaggregated monitoring, the essay makes the case for a change from delivery-cantered to agency-cantered policy.

Keywords: Women's empowerment, Odisha, Mission Shakti, Panchayati Raj, Proxy Representation, Institutions and Agency.

1. Introduction:

In India's discussion of gender and development, Odisha holds a unique position. Mission Shakti has expanded from 41,475 self-help groups (SHGs) in 2001–02 to 6,02,013 groups in 2020-21, serving about 70 lakh women, since its founding on International Women's Day in 2001 (IIPA, n.d.). Additionally, the state extended the reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) to 50% (Orissa High Court, 2023), established the Subhadra cash-transfer scheme in 2024 (Mishra, 2024), and established a dedicated Department of Mission Shakti, which is regarded as the first of its kind in India (Sahoo et al., 2024). Empowerment is frequently portrayed in public discourse surrounding these programs as economic inclusion, with women saving, borrowing, and earning. That story is not complete. According to Kabeer (1999), empowerment is the process by which individuals who were previously deprived of the capacity to make wise decisions in their lives gain it. Only when women are able to exercise agency in the home,

village assembly, political party, and state, and when institutions react to that agency, do resources like income and credit become empowerment. A woman may occupy a reserved sarpanch seat without having any say over how panchayat money is utilised, or she may own a bank account but have no control over how it is used.

2. Conceptual Framework:

Three interconnected dimensions are used by Kabeer (1999) to conceptualise the ability to exercise choice: resources, which include both present and future claims; agency, which includes decision-making as well as more nuanced forms of negotiation and bargaining; and achievements, which refer to well-being outcomes. Additionally, she places human choice within structural bounds, so empowerment must be evaluated in light of the norms and regulations that dictate the options. Four domains are arranged using the methodology in this article. Credit, savings, income, assets, and transfers are all considered resources in the economic arena. The political domain includes speaking in gram sabhas, running for office, and exercising agency in group decision-making. The social domain deals with the relationships and standards that control women's movement, safety, and bodily autonomy. The organisations and regulations (departments, plans, courts, party structures, monitoring systems) that mediate whether resources become agency and agency becomes achievement are included in the institutional domain.

A multi-domain perspective is supported by two lines of evidence. First, Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) demonstrated that leaders invest more on infrastructure pertinent to their own gender's demands by using randomly reserved village-council head positions in West Bengal and Rajasthan; who makes the decisions influences what is provided. Second, Sanyal (2009) conducted interviews with 400 women in 59 microfinance groups in West Bengal and discovered that roughly one-third of the groups engaged in collective action. She attributed this to the social capital and normative influence that group participation produced. According to Sanyal (2014), credit groups have the potential to become civic platforms; however, the circumstances under which they do so need to be investigated rather than taken for granted.

3. Method and Data:

The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019–21), an assessment of Mission Shakti in four districts of the Kalahandi-Balangir-Koraput (KBK) region by the Indian Institute of Public Administration (IIPA), legislative and electoral profiles from PRS Legislative Research and the Odisha Election Watch-Association for Democratic Reforms (OEW-ADR) analysis, and official or judicial documents, such as a 2023 Orissa High Court ruling and a 2025 report from the Ministry of Panchayati Raj's advisory committee on proxy participation. Only papers that could be obtained were used when sources were accessed in November 2026. Figures should be seen as indicative when they are derived from summaries or news stories rather than main datasets. Instead of supporting causal inference, the design encourages pattern recognition.

4. The Economic Dimension: Resources Expanded, Assets Lagging

One of the biggest state-run SHG schemes in India is Mission Shakti. The state has attempted to encourage groups to pursue entrepreneurship by providing them with seed money, revolving financing, and interest subsidies (IIPA, n.d.; Sahoo et al., 2024). In general, financial inclusion has expanded: over one crore women in Odisha were believed to have Jan Dhan bank accounts at the time of Subhadra's inauguration (Business Today Desk, 2024). Through direct benefit transfer, eligible women between the ages of 21 and

60 earn Rs 10,000 year, for a total of Rs 50,000 over five years (Mishra, 2024). According to Kabeer, these programs increase resources. There is less proof of what these resources accomplish. Just over half of members (51.53%) made up to Rs 5,000 per month, according to the IIPA evaluation conducted in Kalahandi, Koraput, Balangir, and Subarnapur. Members incomes increased after joining SHGs, but participation did not significantly alter asset creation (IIPA, n.d.). In a similar vein, Singh (2020) warns that while some women's SHGs manage enterprises valued at thousands of rupees, they do not adequately represent the 70 lakh women in six lakh groups.

The economic model's empowering effect is constrained by three characteristics. First, women who experience salary increases but do not accumulate assets are vulnerable to shocks and remain reliant on government assistance. Second, control over productive assets, markets, or household choices is not comparable to subsidised credit or minor payments. Third, heterogeneity can be hidden by headline coverage: averages obscure the small percentage of high-performing groups. Therefore, economic empowerment is essential yet insufficient based on these findings.

5. The Political Dimension: Presence Without Power

Odisha's reservation has created a remarkably feminised political environment at the grassroots level. According to the OEW-ADR examination of affidavits from 726 of 851 Zilla Parishad members in the 2022 panchayat elections, 385 (53%) of them were women (The Statesman News Service, 2022), and women were reportedly in charge of almost 70% of Zilla Parishads (International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics, 2022). The innovation is significant: Women's leadership can alter the public goods a village obtains, as demonstrated by Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004). However, being present does not equate to power. Although the Odisha Gram Panchayat Act mandates women's presence for Gram Sabha and Palli Sabha quorum, this has had little effect on actual participation, according to an article in the Government of Odisha's own Odisha Review, which acknowledges that numerical strength has not been an indicator of effective participation (Odisha Review, 2021). The 73rd Constitutional Amendment is defeated by 'sarpanch-patism,' according to the Orissa High Court, which expressed grave concern in November 2023 about husbands and male relatives acting as de facto sarpanches. The court also ordered the Panchayati Raj Department to report on the actions taken and on capacity-building for women sarpanches (Live Law News Network, 2023; Orissa High Court, 2023). The Ministry of Panchayati Raj's 2025 advisory group also blames sociocultural hurdles, lax enforcement of legislative protections, and patriarchal norms for the low level of effective participation in states that have increased reservation to 50% (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2025).

As power concentrates, representation becomes thinner. Women's representation in the 147-member Odisha Assembly decreased from 10% to 7% in 2024 when 11 were elected, three fewer than in 2019 (PRS Legislative Research, 2024). The national scenario is only slightly better: women comprised 9% of state assembly members on average and 15% of the 17th Lok Sabha (PRS Legislative Research, 2023). One-third of the seats in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies are reserved under the Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, 2023, although its implementation is dependent on delimitation following a census conducted after the Act (Sharma, 2023). Before making judgements regarding timing, readers should confirm the present state of implementation. Analytically, the contrast is significant. Women's numbers are higher in areas where seats are required by law (PRIs); they are lower in areas where entry is contingent on party nomination and electoral competition (the Assembly). This implies that although the pipeline (training, party support, resources) that enables women to rise and exercise their voice is weak,

reservations may quickly establish a presence. This is not a proven causal assertion, but rather an inference drawn from the contrast.

6. The Social Dimension: Norms, Safety and Autonomy:

According to the People's Archive of Rural India (PARI), which summarises the NFHS-5 results for Odisha, 32% of women between the ages of 18 and 49 reported experiencing physical or sexual violence (Bhadra, 2021), only 11% of those who had experienced such violence sought help (*Ibid*), and 21% of women between the ages of 20 and 24 had married before the legal minimum age of 18 (*Ibid*). These metrics demonstrate that significant limitations on safety and bodily liberty coexist with increases in money and municipal office. They are accomplishment deficits, according to Kabeer, which are results where gender disparity endures in spite of increased resources. Participation in public life is also influenced by social norms. The essay in the Odisha Review attributes women's seeming lack of interest in politics to a male-dominated societal structure that deprives women of equitable treatment (Odisha Review, 2021). The institutional structure of village assemblies is likely to interact with such norms: quorum requirements by themselves cannot generate voice if meetings are conducted at times and in areas where males predominate.

In Scheduled Areas, where the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) centres self-governance around the Gram Sabha, the situation is more complicated. Case studies of women's roles and involvement in Gram Sabhas and Palli Sabhas in Sambalpur district are included in Vasundhara's study on PESA implementation (Singh et al., 2002). This emphasises that rather than drawing conclusions from state averages, tribal women's participation must be investigated independently. A possible counterweight is provided by associational life. Credit groups can serve as venues for collective action, as demonstrated by Sanyal (2009), and Sanyal (2014) emphasises that results vary depending on the status of women in the home. Thus, the federated structure of Mission Shakti might function as municipal infrastructure. Future study is needed to determine whether Mission Shakti groups have been used consistently to address violence or early marriage, as the sources examined here do not.

7. The Institutional Dimension: Delivery, Accountability and Autonomy

Four institutional traits determine whether resources and presence become agency.

Increasing delivery is the first effect of convergence. According to Singh (2020), a proposal that integrates Mission Shakti with eleven government entities for procurement and service delivery has the ability to challenge patriarchy by broadening the sectors in which women's SHGs can operate. Convergence can help women-owned enterprises reach new markets, but it also increases their dependence on the government as a buyer, funder, and regulator.

Second, the SHG network is a political constituency due to its scale. Singh speculates that the network's size 70 lakh women in six lakh groups may account for the introduction of additional programs in the run-up to the 2019 general and assembly elections (Singh, 2020). Such programs are nonetheless legitimate despite this. It does increase the possibility that organisations will be viewed more as delivery services or vote banks than as independent civic entities. What sets empowerment apart from patronage are autonomy, representation, and voice.

Third, capacity and enforcement are still inadequate. Despite years of reservation and necessary court urging, proxy practices continued, as evidenced by the Orissa High Court's order for the department to explain what action it had taken against proxy sarpanches and what capacity-building it had offered (Live

Law News Network, 2023). Similar conclusions were expressed by the ministry-level committee (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2025). Reservations generate seats rather than authority in the absence of punishments, open processes, and ongoing training.

Fourth, there are still gaps in evidence and accountability. While the national survey is the primary source on violence and marriage (Bhadra, 2021), the available assessment evidence for Mission Shakti highlights earnings, savings, loans, and group functioning (IIPA, n.d.). Routine, gender-disaggregated governance statistics for Odisha, such as the percentage of women who speak in Gram Sabhas, the percentage of panchayat decisions made by elected women, or the percentage of SHG members among candidates, are not reported, as far as this review is aware. The state cannot determine if its institutions are generating agency in the absence of such measurements.

8. Towards an Agency-Centred Policy Agenda

The seven priorities suggested by the diagnosis above are the author's analytical suggestions rather than the conclusions of the referenced sources, unless otherwise noted.

1. Building political capability. In accordance with the High Court's guidance on capacity-building (Live Law News Network, 2023), offer organised training to elected female representatives at all three levels. Additionally, connect SHG federations with Gram Panchayats so that SHG leaders can become knowledgeable candidates and voters.
2. The prohibition of proxy representation. Create a grievance channel, keep public records of who attends and signs panchayat meetings, and implement graded administrative action based on the recommendations of the advisory committee (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2025).
3. A pipeline of potential legislators. Encourage women ward members and Zilla Parishad members to run for higher office, and encourage political parties to get candidates ready before the 2023 constitutional amendment goes into effect (Sharma, 2023).
4. SHG federations as civic forums. Building on findings that credit groups may produce collective action, incorporate modules on rights, violence, and political awareness into regular SHG training (Sanyal, 2009).
5. Cash-plus connections. Provide interventions that address violence and early marriage to Subhadra and Mission Shakti recipients based on the NFHS-5 indicators (Bhadra, 2021).
6. Livelihoods focused on assets. In response to the IIPA finding on assets, shift the focus from loan and subvention quantities to asset creation and market linkage (IIPA, n.d.).
7. Independent assessment and governance metrics broken down by gender. Release yearly data on proxy complaints and women's involvement in Gram Sabhas, along with a separate analysis of tribal women in Scheduled Areas.

9. Limitations and Future Research

Secondary sources are used in this desk-based review. Instead of using peer-reviewed datasets, some evidence comes from government publications, press stories, and summaries, and some papers have no publication date. There is little data on tribal women and Scheduled Areas. Future research should combine household surveys with fieldwork in Scheduled Areas, examine party nomination practices, compare the Gram Sabha involvement of SHG and non-SHG women, and determine whether SHG membership results in candidature, voting independence, or group action against violence.

10. Conclusion:

Odisha has established an amazing framework for women's empowerment, including a large network of Self-Help Groups (SHGs), a large number of women in local administration, and an expanding range of cash and entrepreneurial projects. However, the evidence examined here indicates that these are mostly improvements in presence and resources. The institutional environment lacks the enforcement, autonomy, and oversight necessary to transform presence into power; women's parliamentary representation is low and declining; proxy practices undermine the authority of female office holders; abuse and early marriage continue; and asset development is restricted. Resources are important, but empowerment is the process of gaining agency inside systems, according to Kabeer's concept (Kabeer, 1999). Therefore, the next stage of Odisha should be determined by whether or not women are able to make decisions, talk, organise, and feel protected rather than by the quantity of groups, accounts, or seats. Treating institutional, social, and political transformation as equal as economic inclusion is necessary to make that change.

Reference:

1. Bhadra, A. (2021, August). National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) 2019–21: Odisha. PARI (People's Archive of Rural India). https://production.ruralindiaonline.org/uploads/National_Family_Health_Survey_NFHS_5_2019_21_Odisha_4c6bf83e37.pdf
2. Business Today Desk. (2024, September 17). Subhadra Yojana: PM Modi launches Subhadra Yojana. Check installment amount, eligibility, benefits, registration details. Business Today.
3. Chattopadhyay, R., & Duflo, E. (2004). Women as policy makers: Evidence from a randomized policy experiment in India. Econometrica, 72(5), 1409-1443. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0262.2004.00539.x
4. Chattopadhyay, R., & Duflo, E. (2004). Women as policy makers: Evidence from a randomized policy experiment in India. Econometrica, 72(5), 1409-1443. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0262.2004.00539.x
5. Indian Institute of Public Administration. (n.d.). Indian Institute of Public Administration. https://www.iipa.org.in/cms/public/
6. International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics. (2022, March 22). In a first, women to head 70% of Zilla Parishads in Odisha. https://iknowpolitics.org/en/news/world-news/first-women-head-70-zilla-parishads-odisha
7. Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. Development and Change, 30(3), 435-464. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00125
8. LiveLaw News Network. (2023, November 11). 'Sarpanch-patism' or husband working as 'proxy' for Sarpanch wife defeats purpose of women reservation: Orissa High Court. LiveLaw. https://www.livelaw.in/amp/high-court/orissa-high-court/orissa-high-court-condemns-proxy-sarpanch-system-violation-of-constitution-73rd-amendment-act-242151
9. Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India. (2025). Report of the Advisory Committee on transforming women's representation and role in Panchayati Raj Institutions: Efforts to eliminate proxy participation (Vol. 1). https://cdnbbsr.s3waas.gov.in/s316026d60ff9b54410b3435b403afd226/uploads/2025/09/2025092417275746 99.pdf

10. Mishra, A. (2024, September 20). Odisha's Subhadra Yojana: How women beneficiaries can get Rs 10,000 a year. Business Standard. https://www.business-standard.com/finance/personal-finance/odisha-s-subhadra-yojana-how-women-beneficiaries-can-get-rs-10-000-a-year-124092000512_1.html
11. Mishra, A. (2024, September 20). Odisha's Subhadra Yojana: How women beneficiaries can get Rs 10,000 a year. Business Standard. https://www.business-standard.com/finance/personal-finance/odisha-s-subhadra-yojana-how-women-beneficiaries-can-get-rs-10-000-a-year-124092000512_1.html
12. Odisha Review. (2021, February–March). Article on women's empowerment through the Panchayati Raj system. Odisha Review, 18-21. Government of Odisha. https://magazines.odisha.gov.in/Orissareview/2021/Feb-Mar/engpdf/18-21.pdf
13. Orissa High Court. (2023, November 8). Judgment on "proxy sarpanch" in a writ petition. Indian Kanoon. https://future.indiankanoon.org/doc/111119222/
14. PRS Legislative Research. (2023). Issues for consideration: The Constitution (128th Amendment) Bill, 2023 (Women's Reservation Bill). https://prsindia.org/billtrack/prs-products/issues-for-consideration-4250
15. PRS Legislative Research. (2024). Profile of the 17th Odisha Legislative Assembly. https://prsindia.org/legislatures/state/vital-stats/profile-of-the-17th-odisha-legislative-assembly
16. Sahoo, B., De, H. K., & Saha, G. S. (2024). Transforming self-help groups into small and medium enterprises (SMEs): Odisha leads the way. Indian Farming, 74(12), 25-28. https://epubs.icar.org.in/index.php/IndFarm/article/view/147040
17. Sanyal, P. (2009). From credit to collective action: The role of microfinance in promoting women's social capital and normative influence. American Sociological Review, 74(4), 529-550. https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240907400402
18. Sanyal, P. (2009). From credit to collective action: The role of microfinance in promoting women's social capital and normative influence. American Sociological Review, 74(4), 529-550. https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240907400402
19. Sanyal, P. (2014). Credit to capabilities: A sociological study of microcredit groups in India. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139939461
20. Sanyal, P. (2014). Credit to capabilities: A sociological study of microcredit groups in India. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139939461
21. Sharma, P. (2023, September 19). Women-s reservation bill to be in force for 15 years from day of commencement. The Week. https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2023/09/19/womens-reservation-bill-to-be-in-force-for-15-years-from-day-of-commencement.html
22. Singh, N. M., Babu, A., Panigrahi, R., & Mohanty, P. (2002). PESA: Myths and realities: Experiences from Orissa. Vasundhara. https://vasundharaodisha.org/upload/pdfFile/f00d89f8767a39d1d04807743d0cdfed.pdf
23. Singh, S. (2020). A time to cross the barriers of patriarchy: A scheme for women self-help groups in Odisha. Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities, 8(2). https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v8i2.3386
24. Singh, S. (2020). A time to cross the barriers of patriarchy: A scheme for women self-help groups in Odisha. Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities, 8(2). https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v8i2.3386

25. Statesman News Service. (2022, May 17). Odisha: 65 newly elected ZP members facing trial in serious criminal charges. The Statesman.