

Tribal Identity and Gender in Odisha the Intellectual and Social Life of Kondh Women

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Abstract:

The Kondh tribes in Odisha have their unique historical, cultural, and social roots. Their society is an advanced society where evil practices of our civilized society, like gender discrimination, caste division, and dowry, are absent. This study aims to analyse the complex and layered nature of identity among Kondh women, focusing on how their tribal identity intersects with their gender identity. The role of Kondh women in socio-cultural as well as economic life is very crucial. In the post-colonial period, their traditional social status has witnessed many changes. They actively participate, share their views, and make decisions regarding their life. The research paper focuses on the socio-economic, cultural, and political role and changing gender relation of the Kondh women of Odisha in the post-colonial period. It also concentrates on changing gender relations and the role of different agencies and government programs towards the upliftment of Kondh women. This research paper explores the multifaceted relationship between gender and tribal identity.

Keywords: Kondh, Women, Gender, Identity, Odia.

INTRODUCTION:

Odisha, the most scenic state of Eastern India, is the home of sixty-two tribal groups in the country. Among them, the Kondh community has the largest share, seventeen percent of the total tribal population of the state. They have unique cultural practices, historical experiences, and languages. They are an indigenous and vulnerable tribal group in Odisha and are mostly found in the districts of Rayagada, Kandhama, Koraput, Kalahandi, Boud, Phulbani, and Nayagarh. They have a single cultural unit, language, and rituals. They don't have any hierarchical political setup, nor do they adhere to any religion, written text, class divisions, etc. All these laid the main foundation of tribal identity among the Kondhs, popularly known as Kandha in the local language. Tribal identity and gender roles are social institutions that influence and intersect with one another in many ways. Tribal identity is associated with cultural heritage and practices, whereas gender identity is formed by social norms and expectations.

Objective:

The main objective of this research paper

- To ascertain whether the Kondh women are socially, politically, educationally, and economically empowered like their male counterparts in the post-colonial period.
- It also focuses on the empowerment of the Kondh women, changing gender roles and issues in the

tribal society.

- To analyse the gender relation in the Kondh society of Odisha and how these relations witnessed changes due to forest laws and modern economic policies like globalization and privatization.
- The study explores the extent of the decision-making power of women in their families and society at large.

Social Status of the Kondh Women:

The women of the Kondh tribe enjoy a higher social position than the women of mainstream caste-based societies where dowry, female infanticide, violence and abuse against the women, marital rape, lack of opportunity, gender discrimination, etc., are very common. Traditionally, the Kondh women have higher social status and autonomy than those in caste-based communities of India. They have more liberty in mobility, marriage, and property ownership, which presents a unique blend of matriarchal and patriarchal elements. This leads to gender equality and reduces the crimes and oppression against women. A Kondh girl of fifteen to twenty years can marry a younger boy of twelve to fourteen years old so that the latter can provide economic stability to the older wife. Widow remarriages are structured in such a way that can be beneficial to the family's interest. A Kondh widow can marry her deceased husband's brother for economic and social security. Here, a mature woman who is relatively older than her husband has control over the man as well as the family. Therefore, the opinion of the women gets precedence over the male members of the family regarding household matters. This system is very unusual in mainstream society.

A special feature of the Kondh social life is the bride price, both in patriarchal and matriarchal societies. In this marriage tradition, the groom's family offers a bride price to the bride's parents. The family members generally finalise the marriage without the consent of the girl. Interestingly, Kondh girls have the liberty to choose their life partners. If the girl denies the proposed boy and elopes with her loved one or if any boy captures her and takes her to his house, he has to compensate the previous one. In Kondh society, polygamy is a common phenomenon. The man marries a second wife if the first one cannot provide a child. There is another reason for having multiple wives: to meet the requirement of manpower in the shifting cultivation. Their traditional customs are comparatively more liberal for women than our civilized society. That's why women are regarded as an asset to the family due to their contributions inside and outside the household. They are on equal footing with the men in every sphere of the society.



Figure 1: A Kond Women from Niyamgiri Mountain with their Distinctive Tattoo on the Face.
(Source-TravelByPhoto.nl.)

The womenfolk of the Kondh tribes in Odisha engage themselves from early childhood in different household activities. A Kondh girl, after attending ten or twelve years, takes all the responsibilities of the home. The absence of plain land forces the Kondhs to shift to cultivation and horticulture. In cultivation, women performed major work like weaning, sowing, digging, watching crops, and protecting them from wild animals and birds during the daytime. They also collect forest products like Kendu leaves, firewood, bamboo shoots, mushrooms, mahula, etc., and sell them in the local markets. Though most of the Kondh women are illiterate, they are more active, confident, and laborious than the men. Their society gives them liberty in the economic aspects. In the Kondh society, a female local doctor or ritualistic head is known as Bejuni who serves the community and gives herbal medicines for various diseases. As a Bejuni, old women enjoy quite a high and respectable position in society. The Kondhs believe that when any misfortune happens, there must be some supernatural power. So, they consult the Bejuni first, ask the reason for any negative incident, and pray for a remedy. Any ritual like birth, death, ancestor worship, or remedy for Dumba, they call the Bejuni. They believe that she can only have the capacity to please the spirits by offering sacrifices. During festival times, Bejuni also worships the tribal gods and other deities by chanting mantras and dancing. However, the entry of a modern way of living led to cultural changes in the Kondh community. Some of the families have started worshipping Hindu deities with nature and celebrating Hindu festivals. This rejects the role and decisions of Bejuni and the healer, Dishari, in the village. Due to the contact with the non-tribal culture and way of living, now they disagree with their knowledge as unscientific and superstitious. Their contact remains mostly with the head of the community, who is often a man.



Figure 2: Kondh Women on their way to Daily Market to sell their Products. (Source -KBK, Tribes of Rayagada)

The Kondh tribes consider women as intelligent and mature. It makes them decision-makers in all matters. There is no discrimination between boy and girl children. Their perception regarding the sex of a child is not like that of their caste-based Hindu counterparts. There is no preference for the birth of a girl or boy. They accept the birth of both boy and girl equally as the blessings of their deity and ancestors. The social status of the Kondh women in Odisha shows that they enjoy the same amount of freedom as their men in society. There is no prevalence of any type of social seclusions for them. They

hold an honorable place in the house as well as in society. No veil system nor is dowry prevalent. They participate with the men in all celebrations and rituals. Any type of child marriage is absent in the Kondh society. The property is transferred to the son, whereas the daughter does not have such a right, but she can take pieces of jewelry and gifts at the time of marriage. Apart from female meriha sacrifices and female infanticides, women in the Kondh society as daughters, brides, widows, and mothers held very respectable positions. The absence of social seclusion, child marriage, and the liberty to select husbands help tribal women to lead better lives than the women of the caste-based society of India. The womenfolk for many centuries have maintained simplicity in their food, dress, ornaments, etc. They are well known for retaining antique ornaments, outfits, socio-cultural practices, and economic traditions. They drape a saree differently and adorn their neck with some long bead necklaces. Despite poverty, illiteracy, and ignorance, they enjoy a position of social honor in the Kondh society. No male dominance over the women in the Kondh household. Both of them consume liquor as there is neither taboo nor any restrictions on it. During festivals both men and women dance together holding hands and singing chorus. It reflects their strong community bonds and egalitarian values. Although after independence the Kondh women got political rights in the Panchayati Raj system, it hardly brought any visible changes in their social status. It is because they have been enjoying a balanced role in society with collaboration and coexistence with their male counterparts. They contribute equality in the agricultural and domestic labor with men which reinforces the notion that both men and women can be partners in social as well as economic life rather than rigid gender divisions and shared labor and mutual support. Married, unmarried, and widows all have equal rights to men and all have a high status in society as community members show respect to them. However, the barren women have very low social status. As the literacy rate is low, very less of Kondh women join white-collar jobs. But they are skilled enough in their way that they make use of the natural resources in the best possible way to gain their livelihood with their indigenous knowledge. The Kondh women play a vital role in preserving cultural identity, tradition, and customs. The degree of empowerment varies from place to place.

Economy and Gender Experience:

The Kondh women's contribution in providing bread and butter for their family is more in comparison to their male counterparts. They are adapted to the environment live a healthy peaceful life and adopt livelihoods based on natural resources. The forest is the main center of the economic, social, cultural, and biological life of the Kondh community and helps maintain ecological balance. It is the main source of their livelihood and an integral part of their identity and traditions. They have a major role in livelihood practices like shifting cultivation, horticulture, minor forest production, and animal husbandry. As compared to the men, women are considerably more active and responsible towards the sustain of family life. Though they contribute a major share in the income, they do not have full autonomy over the produce in which all the members of the family are involved. But they have full autonomy over their income. They collect firewood, edible roots, fruits, flowers, siali leaves, and medicinal plants and sell them in the local market. Almost all the seasons find something that ultimately gives them nutrition as well as money. Forest products are an important part of their socio-economic and religious life. Women are engaged in shifting cultivation, horticulture, wage labor, livestock management, agriculture, self-help groups, and other services. Besides household work, they perform a major part of the agricultural activities and marketing of their products in small industries.

Kondh Women's Experiences of Colonialism:

The Kondh tribes have settled in the forest and hilly areas of Odisha since the earliest times. Despite being associated with the forest for survival, their rights are unrecorded and prohibited. Beginning from the colonial period to the post-colonial period, their rights over the forest are not recognised by the administration, which brings historical injustice to this primitive people. The British Government followed a policy of complete isolation and then a policy of exclusion or partial exclusion of the tribal tracts in India. They advocated an approach of leaving them alone towards the Kondh tribes in the hilly tracts of Odisha. The status and role of the Kondh women witnessed drastic changes with the advent of British rule in Odisha. The restriction to access the forest by the British rule made the Kondh tribes marginalized, and they were misrepresented as a savage race and their traditions as barbaric. Their dependence on the forest was restricted in favor of the Forest Laws. The British rule prioritized the commercial interest of the contractors, like timber extraction, over the economic dependence of the Kondhs on the forests. It disturbed their age-old cultural and economic practices. It threatens their cultural and spiritual connection to the forest. Their civilizing mission led to the transformation and exploitation of Kondh women in the name of efficient government control of the forest. It gradually denies them free access to their forest, which they have been using for generations. They lost their important source of power as access to forests became a criminal offense. Their knowledge of the flora and fauna of the forest of Odisha and their old ritualistic connection with the forest changed. Further, the commercialization of agriculture, plantation, and mono-cropping limited their control over the forest land and resources. Despite these challenges, they were able to preserve their unique culture, social practices, and identity by adopting the changing political institutions.

Religious Conversion and Cultural Shift:

During the nineteenth century, the entry of British missionaries in the forest tracts brought social and cultural changes that affected the gender role of the Kondh women in Odisha. The tribe witnessed a new religion, i.e., Christianity. The Christian missionaries brought education and moral reclamation to the tribal society in Odisha. Although the progress of education among the Kondh girls was very slow, the missionaries succeeded in teaching them. But their educational activities were restricted only to learning their language, i.e., Kui, and learning folk songs. Kond women who accepted Christianity gave up tattooing their arms and faces and drinking wine, which brought new changes in the gender relations in the tribal society. The introduction of modern education is also an important factor in bringing changes in the gender relations and cultural practices of the Kondh women. The missionaries began their civilized mission first by converting the female Meriah or human sacrifice victims rescued from the Kondh areas. This conversion became apparent as a defense against Hindu exploitation. The Kondh women generally wore heavy ornaments made up of beads and hand-woven clothes known as Kapdaganda with a very distinctive design. The missionary ladies who come to the Kondh villages for welfare programmes teach them to wear a saree and blouse. The missionaries considered this traditional costume as uncultured, and they are still today on a mission to civilize this primitive people.



Figure 3: Dongria Kondhs busy Weaving Kapdaganda, a traditional shawl in the Pravasi Bharatiya Divash at Bhubaneswar, in January 2025. (Source: ETV, Bharat)

Post-Colonial Transformation:

After independence, many development projects like the construction of dams, factories, and mines affected the traditional way of life of the Kondh tribes. It led to their displacement from their land and destroyed their age-old cultural heritage.

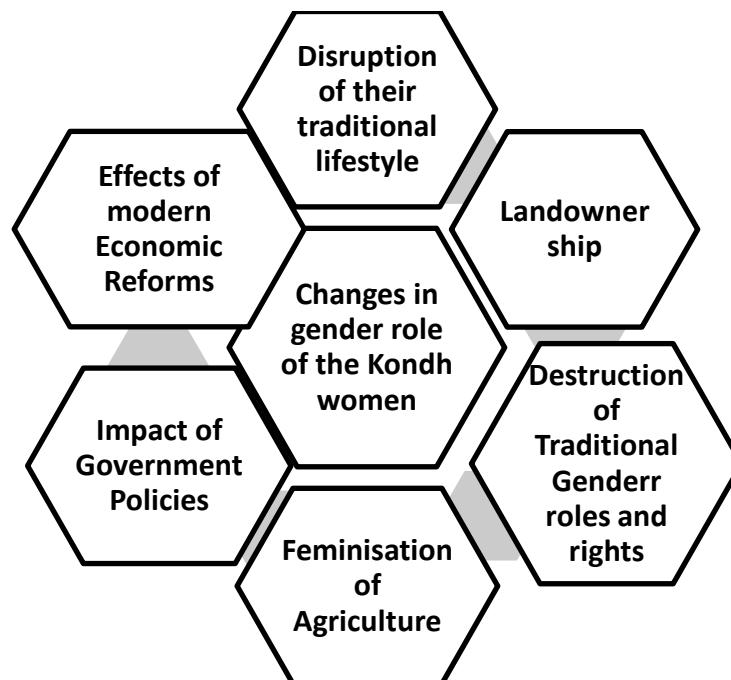


Figure 4: Changing gender role of the Kondh Women during the Post-Colonial Period.

The state economic and administrative policies during the post-colonial period deeply affected the lives of the Kondh tribes. The shrinking forest land, commercialisation of agriculture, hybrid farming, and forest laws disrupted their traditional methods of livelihoods. This resulted in the migration of Kondh men to the plain regions in search of livelihood and resulted in the “feminisations of agriculture.” This refers to the increasing participation of the Kondh women in taking the leadership in farming and conservation of forest resources. However, modern scientific methods and economic reforms like

globalisation and privatisation weakened their gender role in their community. This leads to the loss of their environmental and cultural knowledge and results in economic insecurity. Though there is no gender discrimination in this tribal community, the traditional patriarchal norms keep the women as the non-owners of the land and push them to the state of non-owning producers. Their role as the food producers and protector of the forest and their rights over domestic property have been destroyed. This seriously affected their economic liberty in the society and changed their role as the guardian of biodiversity conservation and cultural preserver. For the economic development of the Kondh community, the Government of Odisha launched many initiatives like Jeebika and Odisha Tribal Empowerment Livelihood Programmes (OTELP), Odisha PVTG Empowerment and Livelihoods Improvement Program (OPELIP). However, as the Kondh women do not have ownership of land, they are not considered as the farmers and therefore left out of these support programmes. These initiatives fail to address the critical gender role of the Kondh women within their community and prevent them from accessing the financial benefits provided by the Odisha Government.

Education and Gender Role Negotiation:

The literacy rate among the Kondh tribes is very low, while the female literacy rate is only three percent. The state government of Odisha has set up many special educational institutions for the tribals in the Kondh villages, like Kanyasrama, Ekalabya model of residential schools, Sebasrama, etc. Despite the introduction of many Government schemes like mid-day meals, bicycles, and scholarships, their situation remains unchanged. Every year, a majority of girls drop out of school due to parental ignorance. Their future is often defined by traditional gender roles like marriage, household responsibilities, and motherhood. Some parents are also concerned about their security while traveling to school in forest areas. Sexual abuse of tribal girls in schools is regularly in the media. Despite many development programs implemented by the Odisha Government, the Kondh women have lagged in every field.

Kondh Women in the Panchayati Raj System:

The tribal identity of the Kondh women is the main driving force for many social and political movements after independence. Their past struggle under British rule is influenced by their socio-economic factors. Their struggles were against historical injustices, preservation of their unique cultural heritage, and securing land rights. This drew the attention of the colonial rulers to their issues and mobilized the determination and resilience of the Kondh women to shape their destinies. The Kondh community has their village council to make decisions regarding the maintenance of peace, justice, the welfare of the community, control of individual behavior, etc. When disputes arise, the council calls up a meeting where only male members can participate, and women are not allowed. So, in the traditional political system of the Kondh society, women have no role. The tribal society in the post-independence period witnessed vast changes that affected the status of women and gender relations. Their past struggle was mostly due to marginalization, colonization, and uprooting from their land. This helped them to shape their political consciousness. Generally, the tribal groups in India saw the external forces as a threat to their life and traditions. Their long resistance against these outsiders to protect their rights over forest and cultural heritage shaped the Kondh women's political outlook after independence. Today, they are involved in grassroots political platforms like village councils and Panchayats, which gives them a voice toward gender related issues and helps to elect their representatives. They now influence

the local decision-making process, which provides them with a sense of ownership and empowerment. With access to modern education and information, many of them are now challenging the old-age gender roles and norms. They now raise their voice against forced evictions and violence against them, which demonstrates how gender dynamics and tribal identity are influenced by today's democratic structures. It ultimately leads to the intersection of gender and tribal identity.

There is an unprecedented change in the Kondh societies that leads to gender gaps in many directions. Formal education and political awareness brought changes in the thoughts of the Kondh women after independence. They are now organized to participate in the local governance set up. In the modern political system, they have the right to vote and elect candidate against a male candidate. They are ready to take part in community activities in their Panchayats. The spread of women's education and mass media has given them a new direction for the betterment of their status. They are ready to take new responsibilities at the local governance system for the development of their areas and people. It created opportunity for them to take part in the elections and minimize the gender inequality in the political sphere. Now they are the part of many decision-making processes in various development programmes of the Government. Their participation led the integration of women in the development process of the tribal communities. They are playing important role at home, farms as well as political sphere. The political engagement of the Kondh women in the post-independence era is influenced by socio-economic factors. Many Kondh women turn to politics as the main solution to resolve their economic inequality, career possibilities and access to better life like that of the non-tribal women. They are attracted to the participation of the democratic process through the Panchayati Raj system in order to assure a brighter future full of basic amenities, development and socio-economic advancement. The women representatives attain the block level meetings, give their opinions and take decisions for the welfare of their community. In the traditional government system, the women are not allowed to participate but now their presence in the grassroots level politics enables them to participate in the meetings of their village and solves issues. As Sarpanch, the Kondh women take responsibilities like sanctioned of Indira Awas Yojana, distribution of job cards and registration of the fellow members in the beneficiary list of various programmes of Odisha government. However, challenges still exist in the form of marginalization of the Kondh women, prejudices and superstitions.

Health:

In our country the tribal groups are the most vulnerable and marginalized section of the population with long time negligence and discriminations. They are backward, poor and illiterate who are leading a miserable life. They experience extreme levels of health deprivation. They are the weakest section of the population who do not have access to proper healthcare facilities. The Kondh women are suffering from serious health issues due to the inaccessibility of modern healthcare facilities in the hilly forests and mountain areas. This is more aggravated due to their illiteracy, superstitions, poverty, ignorance, lack of safe drinking water, and unhygienic way of life. Most of them are malnourished, and their dietary energy intake is not adequate for their day-to-day physical work. Malnutrition is rampant among the Kondh community, and poor nutrition among the women remains throughout their lifetime. They are more likely to have kids by the age of twenty, more likely not to consume nutritional food like milk, pulses, and curd during pregnancy, and more likely not to receive pre and post-delivery treatment. Most of them suffer from the non-accessibility of hospitals and poor nutrition and suffer from several chronic diseases like anemia, tuberculosis, malaria, malnutrition, etc.

Discrimination against the Kondh Women:

The Kondhs are generally facing much discrimination by the forest policies of the government. Their women are more prone to many atrocities like abuses by the contractors, visitors, and government officials and sometimes by their community men. They are also discriminated in case of cultivation and ownership of the lands and suffer most in the land-related violence. Many times, they are molested and beaten, which shows the extreme vulnerability of the Kondh women. Poverty, ignorance to laws and illiteracy make them more prone to discrimination and exploitation even in case of filing complains for crime like rape. Due to globalisation, the hilly tribal lands are given to the big corporate houses and multinational companies, which adds more misery to the life of the Kondh women in Odisha, especially in the Rayagada and Koraput districts. Due to the commercialisation of their lands, they are displaced from their native places and lose their traditional agriculture and livelihood security. They are also the victim of false job promises and attractive lifestyles in urban areas and trafficking by outsiders. Modern economic policies like globalization, privatization, and liberalization have opened the gate of imperial plunder of their natural resources and lands. Because of the displacement from the ancestral land, exploitation and trafficking of girls of this indigenous group have become a regular practice nowadays. By taking advantage of their ignorance, poverty, illiteracy, and innocence, agents are very active in tribal areas. These outsiders pay a small amount to the family of the tribal girls and sell them to other agents, and the chain moves on till they are exploited to its fullest extent. They are sold like commodities and treated very badly, like animals. Due to the lack of education, many of them don't have proper documentation, which makes it difficult for them to get government support and legal assistance when they become the victims of violence by state forces or contractors. Due to their vulnerability, sometimes, government agencies also fail to cooperate with them. Their exposure to violence and the trauma of losing land affects their mental health.

Witch Hunting:

Witch-hunting is an age-old practice among the tribal groups of Odisha and other parts of the country. The Kondh communities of Odisha have a strong belief in the existence of supernatural forces and witches. The majority of them are still in this age of technological advancement and seek the help of Gunia or Ojha, the village healer for illness. In case of crop failure, calamities, pandemics, or disease of family members, a woman is accused as Dahani or a witch by the male relatives. Generally, widows having land were accused of witchcraft by their family members for economic motives to grab their land. During the time of the COVID-19 Pandemic, this practice increased many times. The accused women don't get the support of their community in the village and are abused, insulted, and ostracized. Further, displacement and modern economic reforms worsened this practice and helped the family members to abuse the women. Witch-hunting is the oldest practice of human rights violation among the Kondh tribes. It is because the Government agencies fail to make people aware of the Odisha Prevention of Witch Hunting Act of 1913. Sorcery-related assaults are closely linked to the health of the girl child, land grabbing, and crop failure. Single Kondh women who are widows or separated are found to be the most vulnerable groups to witch branding-related crimes. Witch-hunting-related murders are mostly registered as general murder cases. Still, it is unsuccessful in preventing this atrocity against the Kondh women, as the people of Kondh tribes refuse to follow the government rules and regulations. Still, cases of harassment of women mentally and physically and damaging their property come in the news many times.



Figure 5: Members of the Dongaria Kondhs Performing Rituals on a Woman Believed to be a Witch. (Source: Rakesh Dixit, India Today)

Conclusion:

There is a misbelief that the Kondh women have usually enjoyed a higher social status in their community than the women of non-tribal society. It is found from the study that the Kondh women have remained far behind their male counterparts in terms of their education, health, employment in white-collar jobs, political representation, and involvement. They are forced to face prejudices and discrimination in a stereotypical male-dominated society. Most of the Kondh parents don't send their girl child to school because one day she will get married and leave the house. Girls are given a proper and full diet but not milk as it is reserved for the son only. They are not part of the property share. Before independence, quite in contrast to the position of Kondh women in all aspects of socio-economic and religious life there are two cruel rituals like female infanticide and Meriha practices were widely prevalent in the tribal society. Every year many girls were killed in the name of superstitions. It was done in privacy and drew less public attention. Though significantly contributing to the farming activities, the Kondh women are debarred from services and trade which requires contact with strangers and greater mobility. In spite of a number of Government plans after independence they are denied proper access to fundamental life necessities like health, education, food, security, employment, justice and equality. Entry of non-tribal rituals and customs in the post-colonial period has brought an ideological change in the community and introduces patriarchal values. It altered the gender role of the women in land and forest. In the name of civilised culture and modern education, there is a systematic destruction of the indigenous way of knowledge, rituals, culture food habits and costumes, undermined the decision-making right of the Kondh women. This also leading a gradual rise of male dominance in community and family changing the gender hierarchy. After independence, the constitutional fathers and policymakers adopted many measures to protect the rights of the tribal women who were from centuries isolated, exploited, neglected, and remained far behind the national mainstream. Still, they are treated unequally in many spheres like social status, education, health services, gender equality, etc. They are still striving for both survival and gender equality. It is observed that Kondh women do not find enough time to participate in political activities at the grassroots level. They have to play multiple roles from early morning to late in the evening to perform domestic activities. Those who participate in the decision-making process also face bureaucratic hurdles. Generally, women find it inconvenient to interact with bureaucrats due to their unawareness of schemes and implementation processes. It is

observed that most of the Kondh women do not have exposure required for dealing with bureaucracy at the local level. It becomes a main cause of the failure of a Kondh woman as Sarpanch or chairperson in the grassroots institutions. Sometimes, male officials don't cooperate with them in the formulation of plans and implementation of Government programmes and policies. However, there are certain exceptions in the gender role of the Kondh women. It is now taken the shape of women movement to promote all the women related issues. But all these concerns of the feminists are unknown to the Kondh women of Odisha. They have been the champions of women's empowerment unknowingly since the earliest times. All the principles of feminism are already present in their culture and traditions. They practice feminism as a habit and daily ritual, which comes naturally. It is an indigenous and spontaneous practice. The Kondh women are far ahead of the women of modern society, who enjoy equality between the sexes. No feminist movement fought for this equality. No strong male members of their society try to oppress the women. After independence, they experienced many changes in gender relations within their community due to the forest laws, which restricted women's space and the entry of Christian missionaries in the Kondh areas during the colonial period. Globalisation, privatisation, spread of education, Self-help groups and Panchayati raj system, etc. also affected their gender relation. They have realised that their rights over land and forest can only give them a dignified and sustainable life. Now they are demanding their rights over land and protection of forest from the government. Tribal identity in the post-colonial period is mainly driven by identity and survival. The Kondh women's gender role is mostly depend on the empowerment and tribal identity. It is now main cause of concern of the Odisha government. Here Kondh women's unique identity is important since it affects their gender role in the society and political participation in the largest democracy of the world. Their influence is visible in the Kondh society as a sizeable section of the tribal population is women.

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