

## Unwed Motherhood: An Indigenous Perspective

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**Abstract:** This research work brings into focus the growing problem of unwed motherhood especially among the teen tribal youth. Odisha is a traditionally rich orthodox society and such type of an issue is faced with dilemma and concern for the future generation. This article explores the various problems these young unwed mothers face in the society and their plight in handling such a sensitive issue. A problem like this creates manifold problems as these young women are literally left in the streets in a helpless state. Our society handles such a sensitive issue with a patriarchal perspective that not only increases the stigma these women face but also puts the life of the children of these unwed mothers in jeopardy. Thus, the need to study this problem and explore the policy prescription if any for these women is the need of the hour. This research paper tries to evaluate and bring forth the status of unwed mothers in the state and also highlight the welfare and policy measures for these women in distress. If this problem is not handled properly it will not only destroy the cultural ethos of our society but also destroy the life of these young women and their innocent child.

**Key Words:** unwed motherhood, status, tribal, violence, protection, youth, awareness, culture, Rape, incest, Patriarchy.

The status of Indian women has always been shrouded under misconceptions and inequalities due to the patriarchal structure of our society. The Indian society is based on this patriarchal structure in which there is no scope and space for women, hence subsequently ascribing women the 'secondary status'. This secondary status leads to different types of discriminations against women, creating a gender imbalance. This imbalance is reflected in decreasing sex ratio, increasing infanticide, lack of work force participation, low literacy rate, increase in maternal mortality rate and many forms of discriminations that suspends a woman in a helpless state facing many issues and challenges. One such issue is violence against women which is observed in our society as a leading factor that dissuades a woman from achieving her full potential and emerges as a strong gender. Women from marginalised sections like minorities, dalits, and many indigenous populaces are further marginalised and discriminated not only because of their gender but also because of their racial identity.

Violence against women often stems out of such discriminations and gives rise to various forms and manifestations. Unwed motherhood is one such form of violence against women. Unwed motherhood is emerging as a serious concern in our society where women are sexually exploited and literally left on the streets in a state of unwed pregnancy. The cases of unwed mothers are creating havoc in the traditional society of Odisha. It has been seen that

Odisha has an unprecedented number of young unwed mothers between the age 14 to 20. Shunned by the society and rejected by their families they were allegedly falling into the hands of traffickers and an estimated 300 girls are missing. Frequent natural disasters in this area have made a large number of people destitute, making them easy targets of sexual exploitations. Experts believe there are 40,000 unwed mothers in Odisha, 70% belonging to the tribal areas of Odisha. "Poverty" coupled with ignorance and innocence compound the problem of unwed mothers in tribal Odisha<sup>1</sup>. The unwed mothers are treated as outcasts rejected by the society and are often viewed as prostitutes and even criminals. A woman loses her dignity, pride and even her most basic human rights.

Unwed motherhood is also a problem of intense proportions among the tribal women. The tribal women face a multitude of problems and discriminations in the society. There are as many as 62 distinct tribes in the state and form 22.5% Of the States total population recognised by the Constitution of the Indian Republic. Tribes like Gond, Juang, Kandha adivasi, Khond, Kol, Santal and many more.<sup>2</sup>. Even though it is many times observed that the status of tribal women is far superior to their urban and rural counterpart as many tribal societies are matriarchal, a direct contrast to the urban and rural set up. But in terms of violence and other inequalities this superior status seems like a myth. Upon observation from the study the status of tribal women who were unwed mothers fared better in their societies in terms of continuing to live within the community with the child and future chances of marriage shows far superior acceptance level of the tribal community.

It was also disturbing to observe that despite this problem is creating an upheaval in the state there are no policy to address this problem. Adequate policy and welfare measures need to be formulated for this social problem. The policy makers must ensure a separate policy for addressing the issue of unwed mothers within the state and also the nation.

This study tries to bring into focus the burning issue of unwed motherhood in tribal areas and show the causes behind this problem. This study also makes an effort to try and offer some solutions to work on eradication remedies. A few case studies are highlighted to offer an insight to this problem.

An attempt has been made in this study to observe certain factors or points of analysis responsible for the rise of this problem in odisha, like situations responsible for unwed mothers position, awareness regarding safety measures, awareness regarding risk factors, awareness regarding governmental and non-governmental agencies working for destitute women, family's reaction towards unwed pregnancy, societal reaction towards unwed pregnancy, respondents opinion regarding the future of the child.

Women in India have a rich background of history and tradition behind them, especially women belonging to the tribal area which is inspiring. It is true, however, that they have suffered much from various kinds of suppressions and all these have to go so that they can contribute their best for the development of the nation. The issue of unwed mothers is not only creating an upheaval in our tradition- bound society but also at the same time raising numerous questions about the status of women. It is obvious from the case studies that a woman is perceived as a commodity that can be used and then discarded. Unless this perception changes no change in the status of women can be observed. However during this

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<sup>1</sup> Sudhir Kakar, Culture and Psyche, Selected Essays, Hardcover.

<sup>2</sup> Odisha Data Highlights: The schedule tribe census of India 2001.

investigation we came across some of the tragic, painful and horrifying cases of innocent girls which had forced them into the state of unwed motherhood. Thus it compelled the researcher to address these heart-breaking stories. The case studies provide a very clear picture of the level of violence against women prevailing in our society. However, all care has been taken to conceal the identity of the respondents as it could endanger their existence. However, for this research purpose, pseudonym has been used for them.<sup>3</sup>

### **CASE STUDY NO: 1**

#### **Personal bio-data:**

Age: 15yrs

Place: Hinjilikut, Ganjam

Caste : SC

Religion: Hindu

Educational qualification: Illiterate

Occupation of father: Farmer

Number of family members: 6

Nature of family: Joint

Mental State: Abnormal

#### **Case History:**

##### **The first case study is the victimization of a mentally - challenged girl.**

This fifteen-year-old girl (Let us call her Kusum) was a little unstable from birth; she belonged to a small community in a small rural area. Everyone in her village was aware of her mental state and she used to roam freely in the village as a child. Her parents and other siblings were unable to restrain her in the house. Being mentally unstable, she was gullible and very innocent. Her mental conditions deteriorated and every one observed that she became more aggressive and intolerant, especially with male persons and gradually lost her mental capabilities. She behaved very aggressively, especially with the male members in her family and didn't even spare her younger brothers. Her mother was the only person who could control her. This sudden behavioural change and her increasing mental dementia was very shocking to her parents as well as the villagers who remembered her as a very sweet-natured girl. Whenever she was asked any question why she was so angry, she even turned more hostile. No one knew the cause of her aggression and violence. To everyone's dismay, it was found that she was pregnant. This was the cause of her changed behaviour. After a lot of questioning, it was found that she was a victim of mass rape on the outskirts of the village close to the pond, which contributed to her unwanted pregnancy as well as her mental instability. It was a screaming shame for the girl and her family. They were too scared as there could be social boycott. They lived under stigma. But eventually their worst fear came true and she was treated like an untouchable once the villagers came to know the matter. There was no sympathy for her from the society. Thus, with ever-increasing pressure from the villagers, her family took her to the police station and lodged a complaint. The police were not able to identify the culprits as the girl was abnormal and couldn't identify her rapists. The villagers believed that the rapists might be from neighbouring villages but nothing certain or conclusive could be found. Thus, the rapists went scot-free. In a case like this, it is impossible for the victim to protect herself against such assaults as she is unable to function like the rest of us owing to her disability. Her mental status could not fathom the crime committed against her and the outcome of such a crime. She was unable to terminate the pregnancy as she was

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<sup>3</sup> The status of unwed mothers in Odisha: an analysis, Dr. Pragyan Das, Lap Lambert Publications, Saarbrücken, Germany, 2010.

not aware of what happened to her. She was even incapable of telling her parents about the crime. The shock of the mass rape was responsible for the loss of her mental balance. The girl's parents as well as the villagers did not want to keep the girl in the village. The parents were forced to take this decision as they had been warned by the villagers to either send their daughter somewhere or leave the village altogether. The stain of having an unmarried pregnant daughter even if she was unstable was too much of a burden for them, and they had other children too to raise in the village. Thus, they claimed to have no option about their daughter's welfare. The police having been put in the charge of the girl brought her to this shelter for destitute women in a city. The shelter took care of her and she was given medical attention for both her pregnancy and her mental condition and after a few months she delivered a baby girl. The baby was placed in an adoptive agency while the mother remained in the shelter. When her parents were asked to take her back, her parents refused to accept her and did not even come to see her once. When the baby was just a few days old, the mother knew which room her baby was in and used to stand outside the room for hours as she was not allowed with the baby being mentally unstable she posed a threat to the baby.

So, she refused to leave the corridor of the place where her baby girl was kept until the baby was taken to the adoptive agency. This truly shows a maternal love for her child even though the mother is abnormal. She at times searched for her baby and cried hysterically when she could not find her child. This fifteen year old mother's story is heart-rending as it is soaked in tragedy. This type of crime against the mentally unstable and vulnerable shakes the very core of humanity. It is indeed up to fate whether this girl would be cured of her mental disease and whether she would lead a normal life. In the first case study, we explore the presence of unwed mothers within the mentally challenged group of women as they are the most vulnerable. The seriousness of such a crime against mentally-challenged woman has been recognized in our society.

## **CASE STUDY NO: 2**

### **Personal Bio-data:**

Age: 14

Place: Lorambha, Bolangir

Caste : ST

Religion: Hindu

Educational qualification: Illiterate

Occupation of father: Farmer

Number of family members: 9

Nature of family: Joint

Mental state: Normal

### **CASE HISTORY:**

#### **The second case study is about Domestic Violence and Incest.**

The second most distressing case study is about a sixteen year old the only daughter of the family aged 16 (let us call her Lalita). She belonged to a joint family where her father along with his brothers lived together. She was always surrounded by male members of her family. During the day time her mother used to go to the nearby forest to collect fire wood and worked in the land nearby. Thus she was left alone at home for doing household chores and taking care of the siblings. There were no other female members at home to share her burdens. Poor girl neither she had education; nor friends. She was regularly molested by her own uncles. Initially she didn't comprehend what was happening to her, thinking that her uncle's might be affectionate towards her. But gradually as the abuse became more physical in nature she got scared and tried to confide in her mother. But her mother was always busy in her work and did not even believe her. When she became pregnant she was thoroughly

confused what was happening and whose child she was carrying because she was being raped by three of her uncle's at regular interval. When her mother came to know that Lalita is two-months pregnant she along with her husband tortured her. But, when Lalita told them that, her own uncles were responsible for this no one believed her. On the contrary, those uncles, who were the real perpetrators of this crime, accused her of bad character loose morals and humiliated her by physical assault. The villagers heard about it and instead of giving justice to the victim added to her misery by putting her to exile .She literally lived in the village as an outcaste and outlaw for days together. Her ordeal never ended as she was again subjected to sexual assault by the few villagers. Her father came to know about this and convinced the village panchayat to take her to the nearby city and leave her in a shelter for her delivery. The villagers agreed and so the girl was taken to the shelter by her family members. The girl is at present eight months pregnant and is staying in the shelter. She had been badly beaten and abused even while she was pregnant and the attending doctor was amazed how the baby was alive after so much of assault which was physical as well as mental.

Deep down her, she was scared and broke down and confessed that she dint want to go back home. She blamed her fate of being born a girl child. According to her 'women are put on earth to be beaten and to work like beasts of burden and to be abused.'She was quite comfortable in the shelter as it was a real home away from home free from torture, abuse and rape. In this case the aspect that disturbed us the most is the 'lack of safety of a girl child even within the four walls of her own home. Ironically family is supposed to be the best environment for a girl child but in this case it was breeding nightmare for her.

This case is a glaring example of domestic violence which is in rise in our society that is dissuading women to realize their full potential. Domestic violence has made its presence felt in our society as 34 percent of women in Odisha unfortunately experience physical violence, 20 percent suffer from emotional trauma and 15 per cent from sexual harassment.

### **Case Study No: 3**

#### **Personal Bio data:**

Age: 15

Place: Teldega, Sundergarh

Caste : ST

Religion: Hindu

Educational qualification: Illiterate

Occupation of father: Farmer

Number of family members: 7

Nature of family: Joint

Mental state: Normal

#### **CASE HISTORY:**

**The third case study is an outcome of caste based violence.**

Whenever there is a caste war the women are held hostage. The case of Basanti is an example (Let us call her Basanti).Actually there was a battle between two groups of boys belonging to two different castes. It took a bloody turn and violence ensued. The upper caste boys wanted to teach a lesson to the lower caste boys. Some boys spotted Basanti going to the pond for washing clothes. One day around noon she was dragged by some boys into a forsaken area and brutally raped. Then she was dumped there in a wretched condition. Poor girl dragged herself to her home and narrated her story. Her family members were scared about this issue creating uproar in the society and in turn were afraid for their daughter's reputation. They were also extremely worried about the marriage perspective of the other two daughters. So

they decided to hush up the matter in fear of public disgrace. The boys who were responsible for this crime got afraid and left the village for fear of being arrested by the police as this girl could easily identify them. They told no one about this issue and left quietly. The girl was left to silently bear the sufferings and mental anguish. She became quiet ill but was taken care of at home, and was kept at home constantly. but after two months she was discovered to be pregnant, the whole family was completely broken by this news and didn't know how to deal with it quietly. Thus, they kept her in the house for three months in the pretext of illness and then by the help of a social activist brought her to this shelter. They decided that the girl stay in the shelter until child birth and then return home, they decided to sell the child to some couple or put it up for adoption. The villagers were made to believe that she is in this town as she is sick with water retention in her stomach and has been admitted in the hospital and will come back upon recovery. This girl is now seven months pregnant and living in this shelter. She is completely shocked and didn't use to talk at all. Gradually she started to respond, as the environment in the shelter was quiet friendly and soothing after the harrowing experience she was condemned to. She confides that she has a great fear of men now and becomes very hysterical if she sees a man. Her mental peace is completely destroyed and she has recurrent nightmares. She being quiet young is missing her mother and is desperate now to leave despite her apprehensions. She considers her pregnancy a curse and treats it like a disease. The baby has no appeal to her and she wants it out of her and keeps on asking the care takers of the shelter to take the baby away from her. Being so young her body is not fit to deal with this horror. She cries constantly at night and becomes very moody at times. Being so young she doesn't know any ways to deal with her sorrow and the pain her body has endured. The shocks of being violated so many times have left her badly damaged. She will probably never marry or carry another child ever again. Her whole life is changed as she will never be the same again physically or psychologically as this issue will haunt her for the rest of her life. Fortunately Basanti is picking up the pieces of her life by learning sewing, a skill that greatly interests her, she wants to earn a living with this as she doesn't want to be a daily wagger like her father or work in the fields like her mother and brother. We are aware that as soon as an atrocity against a dalit or lower caste person occurs, judicial remedies and even financial redress through the SC/ST (POA) Act lies open for the victim. But rarely any case reaches this stage. These data actually relate to the cases that have come to the trial level. When compounded with the fact that less than 5% of the crimes reach the court, the conviction rate is less than 1 percent. (Source-The Seventh NCSC/ST Report (2001-2002).

While **concluding** this study a lot of **findings** have surfaced like the status of tribal women and mentally imbalanced women as unwed mothers which implore us as human beings to take a serious and steady look at this issue and raise concern in our society. Thus, in order to stop discrimination against women it is imperative to provide them with a secure and healthy environment enabling them to acquire a better status in life by attainment of socio-economical, religious, educational and political freedom. The perception of the masses towards women needs an overall change. This type of change not only positively influences the female gender but also the country. By empowerment of women, the nation will also be empowered. This proves that the growth of a nation is possible only by the equal contribution of both the genders. As there are many dimensions of empowerment and roles played by genders can be reversed, the governmental and non-governmental agencies and institutions have established many measures to safe-guard women but despite these measures women continue to face different types of harassment in our society. This is evident by the presence

of violence as a dominating factor in our society. As this is a male dominated world, women being physically weak, are suppressed by the male gender in our society.<sup>4</sup>

Basing on the above mentioned case studies and data certain valuable **suggestions** have been formulated keeping in focus important factors like --- the spread of this issue among vulnerable classes victimising the already victimised. The issue of unwed mothers is rampant in our society today despite the rich culture and traditions of our state. From the above study two major factors come into focus: the first one being to get rid of this problem and the second one is if cases of unwed mothers are found, care should be taken to improve not only their life but also the life of their children. From the present study certain suggestions have come into perspective i.e. all efforts should be made to identify and arrest the accused, stringent laws should be made and strict punishment along with financial penalty should be made for the accused. Awareness campaigns regarding welfare measures and legal issues should be implemented especially at grass root level as well as the presence of women police station or Mahila desk in all the villages must be implemented, adult education system should be made functional, political rights and financial and literacy campaign with gender emphasis should also be organized in all the remote rural areas. Awareness regarding safety measures like use of contraception, risks factors like unsafe intimacy leading to pregnancy HIV/AIDs, and Sexually transmitted diseases etc should be imparted.

The society needs to be more sensitized about the problem of unwed mothers and should adopt measures to avoid domestic violence, mothers of the young girl along with their daughter should be made aware of the problems and how to protect themselves from such type of crime, mother and daughter's relationship should be a friendly one where she tells all her problems without fear and favour. The welfare schemes like Short Stay Homes and Swadhar Shelter homes for destitutes should be available in rural and tribal areas so as to give these victims immediate relief instead of only being available at urban areas. A committee should diligently monitor the lives of the destitute women once they are in the Short Stay Homes and Swadhar Shelter Homes. Special attention needs to be given to rehabilitate them within the time span allotted to these homes. And special attention needs to be given to the children who live with these unwed mothers. Print and electronic media should be active in the rural and tribal areas to spread the message of safe sex and knowledge regarding the risks involved in unprotected sex through pamphlets, showing documentaries on the life of unwed mothers and the life of their innocent children in schools and colleges. These measures will instil in the youth greater awareness and responsibility. As false promise to marry is one of the most common causes of unwed motherhood women must be educated against this act. The severe laws and punishments for this crime should be highlighted.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> ibid

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