

Vocational Education and Rural Women in South Odisha: Historical Trends and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

In rural India vocational education has emerged as a key tactic for advancing women's empowerment and socioeconomic development. Vocational education has greatly improved women's employability and standard of living in South Odisha where a substantial section of the population lives in rural and tribal communities. Agriculture, weaving, handicrafts, food processing and forest-based activities are examples of informal family-based occupational skills that rural women have historically mastered. However, their access to formal vocational education was hampered by a lack of educational options, poverty, gender discrimination and insufficient institutional support. In order to increase women's participation in the workforce, the governments of India and Odisha implemented a number of vocational education programs through Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs), vocational higher secondary schools, polytechnic institutions, Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and skill development initiatives. This study analyses the main obstacles to the expansion and efficacy of vocational education for rural women in South Odisha and looks at historical developments in the field. It emphasizes how government initiatives, including as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) and the Skill India Mission have increased access to skill-based education and career prospects. Despite these efforts, rural women still encounter obstacles like poor transportation, inadequate infrastructure a shortage of qualified teachers, financial limitations, social standards and few industry connections. The study comes to the conclusion that enhancing vocational education through gender-responsive policies, better infrastructure, industry collaboration and locally relevant skill training can boost women's economic independence, encourage entrepreneurship and support South Odisha's inclusive and sustainable development.

Keywords: Vocational Education, Rural Women, South Odisha, Skill Development, Women's Empowerment, Employability, Entrepreneurship, Rural Development, NEP 2020

INTRODUCTION

Vocational education has long been recognized as a crucial instrument for promoting economic development, social inclusion, and human resource development. Vocational education gives people the practical skills, technical abilities and occupational knowledge needed for successful work and business, in contrast to general education, which mostly stresses academic information. Vocational education has emerged as a crucial tactic in developing nations like India to combat poverty, unemployment and social inequality while also improving young people's and marginalized populations employability. Beyond only teaching skills, vocational education helps rural women become economically independent move up the social ladder, have more influence over decisions and take part in communal development in light of globalization, technological innovation and shifting labour market demands where skilled human resources are now essential for long-term economic growth the importance of vocational education has only grown. India's ancient traditions have a strong foundation for the idea of vocational education. Indigenous learning systems were used to transfer professional information long before contemporary educational institutions were established. Practical skills connected to agriculture, weaving, pottery, metalworking, carpentry, fishing, food processing, needlework and other crafts were passed down through families, artisan communities and hereditary occupational groups. The majority of these traditional vocational training programs were community-based, informal, and strongly associated with regional economic activity.

Women's participation in these occupations was substantial although their contributions were rarely recognized within formal educational frameworks. Through observation, apprenticeship, and knowledge transfer between generations, rural women developed skills that made a substantial contribution to household production and the rural economy. In India vocational education took on new dimensions during the colonial era. Technical and vocational education got very little attention in British educational plans which mostly focused on literary education to produce clerical professionals for colonial administration. However, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, missionary schools, industrial schools, craft centres, and agricultural institutions progressively came into being. These establishments brought organized instruction, especially for women, in sewing, embroidery, nursing, teaching, handicrafts, household science, and agriculture. In Odisha, missionary groups were instrumental in promoting females' education and career training particularly in tribal and socially disadvantaged regions. These programs had a narrow scope, but they set the stage for later growth in women's vocational education. Vocational education became more significant in national development plans after India attained independence in 1947. Technical education, industrial training, agricultural extension, rural development, and women's education were all highlighted as crucial elements of nation-building in subsequent Five-Year Plans.

Various institutions such as Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs), polytechnic colleges, vocational higher secondary schools, community polytechnics and training centres for women were established across the country. National policies including the National Policy on Education (1968, 1986, revised in 1992), the National Skill Development Policy (2009), Skill India Mission (2015), Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY), National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), and the National Education Policy (2020) have collectively expanded opportunities for vocational education particularly among women and rural youth. These initiatives have sought to bridge the gap between education and employment while promoting entrepreneurship, self-employment, and livelihood diversification. Odisha presents a unique historical and socio-economic context for examining vocational education. Despite possessing rich natural resources, abundant cultural heritage and diverse traditional occupations the state has historically faced challenges such as poverty, low literacy, regional disparities and limited industrialization.

One of the most socio-economically varied areas of the state is South Odisha, which includes districts like Ganjam, Gajapati, Koraput, Rayagada, Kandhamal and Malkangiri. A sizable rural and tribal population, reliance on agricultural and forest resources, and a thriving heritage of handicrafts, handloom weaving, bamboo work, sericulture, food processing, fisheries, and other indigenous occupations are the region's defining characteristics. Women have historically played crucial roles in production, processing, selling, and household administration in these traditional economic activities. Rural women in South Odisha have long faced educational and career difficulties despite their substantial economic contributions. Patriarchal social norms, early marriage, domestic responsibilities, restricted mobility, poverty, inadequate educational infrastructure and limited access to technical institutions have historically constrained women's participation in formal vocational education. In tribal and remote areas, geographical isolation, poor transportation, language barriers, and insufficient institutional support have further reduced opportunities for skill development. Consequently, many rural women continued to rely on informal occupational learning without obtaining formal certification, technical training, or access to modern technologies and markets. The historical trajectory of vocational education in South Odisha reflects a gradual transition from traditional skill transmission to organized institutional training.

During the colonial period, missionary schools and industrial training initiatives introduced vocational education on a limited scale. After Independence, government interventions expanded vocational institutions and introduced programmes aimed at improving rural livelihoods and women's economic participation. The establishment of Industrial Training Institutes, women's polytechnics, Rural Self Employment Training Institutes (RSETIs), Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs), Industrial Training Centres (ITCs), Self-Help Groups (SHGs), Odisha Livelihoods Mission (OLM), Odisha Rural Development and Marketing Society (ORMAS), and various non-governmental organizations has considerably broadened access to vocational education and entrepreneurship development across South Odisha. These institutions have provided training in tailoring, food processing, computer applications, hospitality, electrical work, health care, agriculture, handloom production, handicrafts, and micro-enterprise development. Nevertheless, important challenges continue to limit the

effectiveness of vocational education among rural women. Many training programmes remain inadequately aligned with local labour market requirements and traditional livelihood systems.

The long-term effects of vocational education are diminished by inadequate infrastructure, a lack of trained teachers, insufficient funding, poor industry connections, digital inequalities, and a lack of post-training job prospects. Additionally, gender norms still limit women's participation in technical and high-paying trades by confining them to a limited number of traditionally feminized occupations. In order to overcome these institutional limitations, reforms that incorporate gender-sensitive planning, local economic requirements, technology innovation, and community involvement are just as important as expanding vocational institutions. In order to investigate the development of vocational education and the involvement of rural women in South Odisha, this study takes a historical stance. It examines how vocational education evolved from traditional occupational methods to modern skill-development programs, examining the socioeconomic, cultural, and policy factors that have shaped women's access to vocational training over time.

The study aims to show that vocational education is not only a tool for creating jobs but also a crucial mechanism for women's empowerment, poverty reduction, social justice, and sustainable rural development by tracking historical patterns and highlighting ongoing issues. By exposing an understudied aspect of women's educational history and providing policy recommendations for bolstering inclusive vocational education systems in rural and tribal areas, the essay adds to the historiography of education in Odisha. Education historians, policymakers, development practitioners, and scholars concerned in gender, skill development and rural transformation in India are anticipated to find value in the findings.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Panigrahi (1972), *History of Orissa* examined the political, social, and economic history of Odisha from ancient to modern times. The author highlighted the significance of traditional occupations such as weaving, pottery, metalwork, and agriculture, which were based on hereditary skill transmission. Although the study does not specifically discuss vocational education or women's participation, it provides a historical foundation for understanding indigenous systems of occupational learning in Odisha.

Mahtab (1980), *History of Modern Orissa* analysed the educational and socio-economic transformation of Odisha during the colonial and early post-independence periods. The study emphasized the role of British educational policies, missionary activities, and social reform movements in expanding educational opportunities. It also noted the establishment of industrial schools and craft training centres, which contributed to the early development of vocational education. However, women's vocational education was not examined separately.

Samal (1989), *Administrative History of Orissa (1866–1912)* explored the administrative development of colonial Odisha using archival records. The study discussed government policies on education, technical instruction, and institutional expansion, showing that vocational education received relatively little attention during the colonial period. The work provides valuable evidence for understanding the administrative background of vocational education but gives limited attention to gender issues and rural women's participation.

Agrawal (1994), *Women, Education and Development* examined the relationship between women's education and socio-economic development in India. The author argued that vocational education plays a crucial role in women's empowerment by improving employment opportunities, income generation, and self-reliance. The study also identified barriers such as poverty, gender discrimination, and inadequate educational facilities. Although the work focuses on India as a whole, its conceptual framework is highly relevant for analysing rural women's vocational education in South Odisha.

Government of Odisha, Orissa District Gazetteer: Ganjam provides detailed information on the district's history, educational institutions, traditional occupations, agriculture, handicrafts, and rural industries. The Gazetteer documents the expansion of educational infrastructure and local economic activities in which women actively participated. While it does not directly analyse vocational education for women, it serves as an important primary source for understanding the historical development of vocational education and rural livelihoods in Ganjam district.



Historical Development of Vocational Education in South Odisha

The development of practical knowledge, technical proficiencies, and occupational skills required for employment and self-employment is the goal of vocational education, a crucial part of the educational system. In South Odisha, vocational education has been crucial in reducing unemployment, enhancing the socioeconomic circumstances of rural and tribal groups, and providing skilled labour to a variety of economic sectors. Through government initiatives, educational reforms, and skill development programs, vocational education has gradually evolved throughout the region, which includes districts like Ganjam, Gajapati, Koraput, Rayagada, Malkangiri, Nabarangpur, Kandhamal, Kalahandi, Nuapada, and Boudh (Government of Odisha, 2000).

Traditional Vocational Practices before Independence

The inhabitants of South Odisha learned occupational skills through traditional means prior to the introduction of institutionalized vocational education. Skills like agriculture, weaving, pottery, blacksmithing, carpentry, bamboo craft, handloom weaving and forest-based jobs were passed down from one generation to the next in rural and tribal communities. The majority of these jobs were inherited and community-based, and learning occurred through practical experience, apprenticeship, and observation rather than formal schooling. Modern education progressively spread throughout Odisha during the British colonial era, although vocational and technical education got little attention, especially in the isolated South Odisha regions where educational resources were still few (History of Odisha, 2021).

Development after Independence

The Indian government acknowledged vocational education as a crucial tool for economic growth and job creation after the country gained independence in 1947. In order to address the increasing need for skilled workers, several educational bodies suggested expanding technical and vocational education. As a result, agricultural training facilities, Polytechnic Colleges, and Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) were set all throughout Odisha including South Odisha. These schools offered instruction in a variety of technical subjects, including engineering trades, agriculture, mechanical work, electrical maintenance, carpentry, welding and tailoring. In order to increase productivity and prospects for self-employment, rural adolescents were encouraged to pursue vocational training through community development programs and rural development initiatives.

Introduction of Vocational Education at the Higher Secondary Level

The introduction of vocational courses at the Higher Secondary (+2) level in 1988 marked a major turning point in the history of vocational education in Odisha. Diversifying secondary education, lowering educated unemployment and equipping students with useful skills applicable to regional businesses and professions were the goals of the program's introduction. In certain Higher Secondary schools and colleges, vocational programs like Agriculture, Engineering and Technology, Business and Commerce, Home Science, Health and Paramedical Services, and Humanities were introduced. To improve students' employability and entrepreneurial skills, the curriculum integrated classroom instruction with hands-on training (Government of Odisha, 2000).

Establishment of the Directorate of Vocational Education

On August 1, 2000, the Government of Odisha created the Directorate of Vocational Education under the Department of Higher Education in order to improve the management and growth of vocational education. Curriculum creation, teacher preparation, oversight of vocational schools, administration of exams, and industry collaboration fell under the purview of the Directorate. Regional offices were set up at Sambalpur, Berhampur, and Bhubaneswar. Through efficient implementation and oversight, the Berhampur Regional Directorate, which oversees vocational schools in the majority of South Odisha's districts, has significantly contributed to the growth of vocational education in the area (Government of Odisha, 2000).

Expansion of Vocational Institutions in South Odisha

In South Odisha vocational education grew significantly throughout the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Access to vocational education was further expanded by the creation of Government Vocational Junior Colleges, Industrial Training Institutes, Polytechnic Colleges, Jan Shikshan Sansthan, Rural Self Employment Training Institutes (RSETIs), and different Skill Development Centres. In order to address local job demands in the fields of agriculture, healthcare, construction, hospitality, information technology, electronics, automotive maintenance, clothing manufacture, and handicrafts, these universities established market-oriented courses. Tribal and economically underprivileged groups received special attention through the establishment of entrepreneurship and livelihood-oriented vocational programs.

Impact of National Skill Development Initiatives

Vocational education in South Odisha was further reinforced by the introduction of national programs like the Skill India Mission, Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), National Skill Qualification Framework (NSQF), and Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY). To increase rural and tribal youth's employability, these programs included industry certification, competency-based training, and placement assistance. In order to improve the calibre and applicability of vocational education, educational institutions have increasingly partnered with businesses and training organizations to offer internships, real-world experience, and skill certification (Samagra Shiksha Odisha, 2022).

Vocational Education under the National Education Policy 2020

By placing a strong emphasis on skill-based learning at the school level, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has brought about significant changes in vocational education. The policy suggests lessening the boundary between academic and vocational streams, boosting internships, merging vocational education with mainstream education, and fostering experiential learning. By adding locally relevant jobs like tribal handicrafts, agriculture, food processing, eco-tourism, forest-based businesses, and digital entrepreneurship into school and higher education curricula, NEP 2020 is anticipated to improve vocational education in South Odisha. While maintaining indigenous knowledge and traditional skills, these adjustments are anticipated to improve employability (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Difficulties in Vocational Education Development

Vocational education in South Odisha still faces a number of obstacles despite significant advancements. Inadequate infrastructure, a lack of skilled vocational instructors, a lack of laboratory facilities, poor industry connections, and few placement chances plague many institutions. Participation in vocational programs is also hampered by remote locations, inadequate transportation, socioeconomic constraints and limited awareness among rural households. Increased funding, more robust public-private partnerships, curriculum modernization, and ongoing teacher and trainer capacity building are all necessary to address these issues (Samagra Shiksha Odisha, 2022).

Challenges and Constraints

Vocational education in South Odisha still faces a number of obstacles that restrict its efficacy, especially for rural women, despite notable advancements. Poverty continues to be a significant obstacle since many families cannot pay training-related costs, which forces women to put wage labour or home chores ahead of their education.

Low educational attainment limits women's access to vocational programs and hinders their capacity to learn technical skills, particularly in rural and tribal communities. Women's participation is further discouraged and dropout rates are increased by sociocultural factors such as early marriage, traditional gender roles, mobility restrictions, and household duties.

In regions like Malkangiri, Rayagada, Kandhamal, and Koraput, access to high-quality training is hampered by the unequal distribution of vocational schools, poor infrastructure, limited transportation, and a lack of skilled trainers, especially female instructors. Furthermore, a lot of training programs are not well matched with local livelihood options, which restricts job opportunities and promotes migration.

Rural women are additionally impacted by the digital divide since they have less access to cell phones, internet, energy, and digital skills, which limits their ability to participate in technology-based training. Inadequate market connections, financing, and entrepreneurial support also prevent women from starting long-lasting businesses. Women's participation in higher-paying technical sectors is restricted by gender stereotyping in vocational education, which continues to push them into conventional trades. A gender-responsive strategy that improves educational access, infrastructure, digital inclusion, financial support, and job-oriented training is needed to address these issues.

DISCUSSION

In South Odisha, vocational education has emerged as a key tool for advancing rural development, poverty alleviation, and women's empowerment. However, poverty, low literacy, poor infrastructure, and sociocultural constraints that restrict access to skill development continue to be obstacles for women in districts like Koraput, Rayagada, Malkangiri, Nabarangpur, Kandhamal, Gajapati, and Ganjam.

During the colonial era, women's education in Odisha was historically ignored, especially in rural and tribal areas. Mahalik (2024) asserts that long-standing educational disparities resulting from this historical exclusion still have an impact on women's involvement in vocational education. The government increased vocational education after independence through ITIs, polytechnics, and skill-development initiatives, although the majority of training was concentrated on traditional jobs like handicrafts, weaving, tailoring and agriculture. According to Mishra (2022), early marriage, school dropout, and poverty still limit Scheduled Tribe women's access to education.

Women now have better access to vocational training through Self-Help Groups (SHGs) thanks to recent efforts including the National Skill Development Mission, DDU-GKY, PMKVY, Odisha Livelihood Mission, and Mission Shakti. According to Rath (2022), these initiatives have improved financial inclusion, income production, and women's ability to make decisions.

Despite these successes, there are still a number of obstacles to overcome. Training programs frequently fall short of the demands of the local labour market, and women's participation is still limited by sociocultural hurdles, poor infrastructure, and digital isolation. While Satpathy (2026) identifies digital inequality as a significant barrier to inclusive skill development, Dagar (2022) highlights the necessity of regionally appropriate and culturally sensitive vocational education. Despite an increase in female labour force participation in Odisha (Government of Odisha, 2025), a large number of women continue to work in low-paying informal jobs.

In South Odisha vocational education has grown considerably overall, but gender stereotypes, poor industry connections, educational disparities and digital impediments still limit its transformative potential. Enhancing women's empowerment and sustainable rural development requires strengthening vocational education through gender-sensitive policies, locally relevant curricula, digital inclusion, support for entrepreneurship, and increased cooperation between the government, educational institutions, and businesses.

Policy Suggestions

1. In distant and tribal regions of South Odisha, expand the number of Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs), Polytechnic Colleges, and women-focused skill development centres to strengthen rural vocational institutions.
2. Incorporate training in handloom weaving, handicrafts, sericulture, bamboo crafts, food processing, fisheries, and other regionally relevant occupations to integrate traditional livelihoods with contemporary vocational education.

3. Encourage gender-inclusive employment practices by offering scholarships, hostel accommodations, secure transportation, childcare assistance, and awareness campaigns to boost rural women's involvement in technical education.
4. To expand apprenticeship options, placement services, and market-oriented training, promote collaborations between vocational schools, local businesses, cooperatives, and entrepreneurs.
5. Increase digital and entrepreneurial skills by giving rural women better access to financing, training in business management, financial literacy, and digital literacy. This will allow them to start sustainable businesses and contribute successfully to the contemporary economy.

CONCLUSION

The South Odisha's history of vocational education shows a slow shift from traditional occupational learning to formal, skill-based education backed by institutional and governmental initiatives. Agriculture, handloom weaving, handicrafts, fishing, food processing, and forest-based livelihoods have all historically benefited from the contributions of rural women however, their abilities have remained mostly unofficial and underappreciated. Through Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs), polytechnic colleges, Self-Help Groups (SHGs), Odisha Livelihoods Mission (OLM), and Rural Self Employment Training Institutes (RSETIs), vocational education has grown significantly since independence, especially with the implementation of the National Policy on Education (1986), Skill India Mission, and the National Education Policy (2020). These programs have improved women's access to chances for skill development and employment. However, the full potential of vocational education is still constrained by enduring issues including poverty, gender inequality, poor infrastructure, few industry connections, digital exclusion, and regional inequities. Vocational education should therefore be acknowledged as a potent tool for women's empowerment, social inclusion and sustainable rural development in addition to being a method for creating jobs.

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