

Medieval Orissa and Women: a special focus on sex trade

Sankarsan Malik
Lecturer,
Dept of History
Berhampur University
Ganjam, Odisha

Abstract : During medieval period Orissa achieved great success in the field of trade and commerce. Oriya traders were expert in the maritime trade. But the decline of Hindu dynasty in later part of sixteenth century brought many changes in the politics of Orissa. Economic condition of the state also started declining. Then the emergence of the Europeans traders in the coastal Orissa during seventeenth century encouraged the trade and commercial activities of the region but could not help to revive the economic condition of Orissa. On other hand the presence of European traders in the coastal town of Orissa encouraged flesh trade. Oriya girls basically from poor family became the major item of this sex business. Foreign traders also started investing money on this business and exported Oriya girls to the other part of the country as well as Europe. It is not like that before the arrival European traders in Orissa Oriya girls were not involved into this business. The institution of prostitution was always there in medieval Orissa. The literatures of the period have given clear description regarding the existence of the sex business in the Oriya society. Kings were appointed dancing girls known as courtesans in their court for the entainment purpose but these courtesans apart from dancing in the court they were also engaged into the prostitution work. Prostitution was a common practice during medieval Orissa. It was considered as essential dustbin for men's relaxation. Patriarchal nature of the Oriya society always encouraged to this institution of prostitution which was responsible for the decline of the women's status in the medieval Orissa.

Key words: *Medieval Orissa, women, sex trade, women position.*

Medieval Orissa was famous for its trade and commercial activities with Far East and south east countries. Economic condition of the Orissa was sound due to its maritime activities. In eastern part of the India Kalinga was standing as a prosperous and wealthy kingdom of the region due to the seafaring activities of the Oriya trader. Before and after the birth of Christ Kalinga or Orissa was a formidable political power extending from the Ganga to the Godavari River.¹ Probably emperor Ashok invaded Kalinga for her wealth and prosperity. In fifth century Kali Das depicts about the Kalinga kingdom in his literary work *Raghuvansam* and portrayed Kalinga king as Mahodadhipati or lord of sea.² *Manjusrimulakalpa*, a sixth century work describes that Kalinga had domination in the sea trade through Bay of Bengal.³ Even to remembering this sea trade of the past a festival has been added with Oriya culture named *balijatra* to celebrate its past glory.

Archaeological evidences regarding this far way trade existed even today. Medieval Oriya literatures have also depicted elaborately regarding the sea trade of Oriya people. Brjanath Badjena, Upndera Bhanja, and others have given information on the maritime activities of the Oriyas. Taopoi tradition which is based on maritime trade of Oriya traders has been adopted as a religious tradition of the Orissa. Kartikapurnima, also a festival related to the maritime trade of Orissa. A story of god Sani (sanischar mela) also describes about the dangerous voyages in the sea.

However this episode of maritime trade of Orissa only attracts the attention of historian towards its ports, revenue, trade route, trade relation, trade goods etc, But forgetting most important subject of the maritime business that is women's role and links with this financial journey. How women was a common part of this sea business. During medieval period Oriya society was dominated by Brahmanical ideology. They were the real administrators of the people, because king could not stand against Brahmans. They were the most respected person on the earth after god. Society was controlled and followed Brahmanical rules and regulations which were based on discriminative ideology. Basically for lower class people and women who were given the status of second class status in the society. Oriya women did not have freedom to speak and live her life. They were restricted by various brahmanical rules and regulations. But women from vasya class and lower strata some time were involved with maritime trade activities. Even they were taking all responsibility of family business in the absence of male persons. Contemporary literary works and travel accounts have also been given information on women's link with trade and commercial activities of the Orissa.

In ancient history of Orissa we have many examples about the women's active role in military, administration, sastravidya and defence. In Kumari Hill, Manchapuri panel of queen cave shows the military skill of Oriya women. Ganeshgumpaha of this hill also portrays a picture where women are fighting with their male counterpart and another image shows a women gourd standing near it. Even in a relic of Ranigumpha, royal women were fighting with wild elephant. In another lithic art of Manchapurigumpha shows a women is riding horse. On the wall of Mukteswar Temple an image of women warrior with horse has been engraved. On the wall of Konark Temple and Rajarani temple there are many life images of female dancer, musician. We have another example of women's contribution to the society that was Bhoumakara dynasty (8th-10th C) which stood as a significant chapter of the Orissa history. One third of the rulers of this dynasty were women. After this dynasty women became invisible in the historical documents except Queen Lalita Devi of Bhoi dynasty, queen Suka Dei of Banki and queen Sumitra Devi of Bhanja dynasty of Mayurbhanja. But they were not given much importance in the Orissa history.

However, in the history of Orissa, we are forgetting their contribution as well as their role in the construction of the society.

Orissa stood a strong maritime trade partner of the contemporary world. On other hand the presence of European traders in the coastal Orissa also encouraged its financial progress. But their presence not only encourage the economical progress also encouraged the trade of flesh. For the sexual enjoyment and sexual need of soldiers and the demand of the young Indian women encouraged Europeans to investing money on this sex trade. Portuguese traders during sixteenth and seventeenth century were involved in sex and slavery trade. Then East Indian Company in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries started arranging young girls and women for their soldiers. These women started their own sex business. A write up by BBC states the British troops helped to establish prostitution dens across India.⁴ Then Indian seamen who were forced into the British military to UK copied the masters by joining the British forces on frequent visit to the local British prostitutes there in nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Thousands of women and girls from continental Europe and Japan were trafficked into British India where they worked as prostitutes serving British soldier and local Indian men.⁵

Prostitution is a tradition existed since the human civilization. In Indian the institution of prostitution was controlled by male society because India was a patriarchal society. Prostitution allowed in the society because male dominant society believed that this dustbin was required to relive the sex impulses of men.⁶

Indian men are consciously taught to be aggressive and tough while women have conditioned to submissive and docile. Women should please men, should be useful to men, to make themselves honoured by them. They should be consol men and make their life sweet and agreeable. Women were granted low status with institutional legitimation. She has become a commodity to sell, item to gift and passive life to abducted and raped.⁷

In Orissa prostitution had great importance in the life of Oriya men. Sadhavas, who were leaders of maritime trade of Orissa were going to south East Asian countries for business purpose and stayed there for long time. To satisfy their sexual appetite sadhavas were indulged with some immoral activities and established sexual relation with local prostitutes. Contemporary Oriya literatures have given some information about this immoral act of merchants. Basically Brajanath Badejena in his work *Chaturvinoda* vividly describes about the sea trade and Oriya merchant's life of the period.

Prstab Chintamani an eighteenth century Oriya literature has given elaborate depiction on this tradition of sex trade. Prostitutes were engaged in the palace as regular employee of the court. They were worked for enjoyment of the court as well as kings guest. Palace prostitutes were experts in the dance and music. Indeed they were courtesans who performed dance in the court and same time worked as prostitutes of the king.⁸

In *Lavanyavati* Kavya a prostitute named Madanika comes to meet prince Chandrabhanu of Karnat Desh.⁹ Brajanath Badejena in his work Priti Vinoda part of *Chaturvinoda* mentions about a prostitute called Nitambini who had easy access to the king's palace.¹⁰

There were various reasons responsible for the rise of sex trade and prostitution in Orissa. Mostly economically backward families were sold their young girls to the local and also European traders who engaged them into brothel works or sold them as sex commodity. Oriya girls who were collected from coastal belt of Orissa exported into different parts of the world as sex slave.

William Bruton who visited Orissa in 1633 A. D. also mentions about this institution in his account of Cuttack and Puri. According to him, "most of the Orissa people have many wives, which they purchase and buy of their parents: some they keep to their vassals, to do their drudgery; others are handsome for issue sake and pleasure".¹¹ During seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the industry of prostitution got a boost due to foreign traders and investors in Orissa. English, French, Dutch merchants, who established their trade centre in the coastal region, purchased and sold the beautiful young girls in their export and import business.¹²

In seventeenth century Pipli and Balaswar was the main port town of Orissa. According to the William Hedges and C R Wilson the Portuguese and Arkhanes pirates were active slave traders of the period. Their ships picked up the people from coast of the Bengal and carried them off as captives to sell them into slavery at Pipli.¹³

In seventeenth century Thevnot visited Orissa and his account gives information on society, economy and geographical location etc. His record describes that women themselves are bold and lascivious and use all arts imaginable to corrupt and debauch young men and especially strangers whom they easily trap because they are handsome and wear good cloths.¹⁴

During British period this trade of selling girls for dancing and religious work still prevalent. Colonial government declared it illegal and issued circular prohibiting sale of girls. Most of the girls were from poor background and were used as prostitutes. In 1832 the govt drafted a law to stop selling girl as dancing girl or any other immoral profession.¹⁵ But irony is British one way enacting laws to check sex trade and other way managing young girls for their soldiers though most of the girls were brought from foreign land.

The institution of prostitution was a common practice during medieval period. Contemporary literatures have given abundant information on this practice. Sarala Das's *Mahabharat*, Nilambar Bidyadhara's *Prstab Cintamani*, Brajanath Badejena's *Chaturvinoda*, Upendra Bhanja's *Lavanyavati*, *Premesudhanidhi*, *Kotibrhmandasundari*, *Rasalekha* and others works of the period describes about this practice. However prostitute was not treated a sex slave of the medieval period, they had their own life and society even they had some importance in the Oriya society. They were singing marriage ritual songs. Even we have an example of

Karpur Dasi a courtesan became queen of a king. But after the landing of European traders on eastern coast of Orissa the definition of prostitution changed and Oriya prostitutes turned into global trade items for sex and slavery works. Huge money invested on this flesh market and Orissa became a major market for selling and exporting young girls to the European market.

Medieval Orissa which witnessed the rise of patriarchal domination after the fall of Bhoumakara dynasty in tenth and eleventh centuries adopted a new culture named Jagannath cult. The rise of Jagannath cult minimised the importance of the shakti cult. As a result women's position in the society also started declining. The literatures of the period also gave importance to the Jagannath cult. Women in these literatures depicted as luxury and enjoyment element. Accordingly women were treated as an item to enjoy and men were the god of her. This change in the medieval Oriya society encouraged to the male society to dominate over women folk and used them as subordinate group in their life. Sex trade or the rise of institution of prostitution which became popular during medieval Orissa was a major outcome of this change.

However, maritime trade worked as fuel to encouraging this practice of prostitution and popularized it as a business. The cosmopolitan feature of Europeans life style attracted young girls to adopt prostitution as business. Some time the girls from poor family were forced to embrace this immoral job. This flesh trade got impetus due to the spread of material life style in the India society. For the sake of luxury life and sexual urge women were also entering into this business. Orissa which had a great fame and name in the world for her trade and commercial activities became the victim of this immoral sex trade. However, we need more study on this subject to frame out the past life of Oriya women.

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malharu asichhi nama madanika
ganika tara darasane.
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