



Revamping Girls' Safety And Empowerment: Analytical Exposition Of Shaktishree Scheme In Parlance To National Initiatives

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Abstract

From ages together women in India have been portrayed propagated and perpetuated as embodiment of divine power or 'Shakti'. But due to decaying of value system in education as an epitome of societal progress, girls have been denied the dignity and equality in status as compared to male counterparts considered in the same parlance. Nationwide, campus safety programmes have been launched to provide a decisive move to gender sensitisation and women's empowerment. After decade long rule by the predecessor BJD, the newly elected BJP led government assuming power for the first time launched 'Shaktishree' programme for giving a boost to women's empowerment in the institutions of higher education. With innovative features like empowered facilitators, technology driven applications and online capacity building initiatives, the programme has proved to be impactful in ensuring women's safety to some extent while aiming at reducing the accelerated pace of terrorising vengeance in academic campuses. This article attempts analytical exposition of this initiative aiming at gender mainstreaming of education giving rise to all-round progress of women folk in the institutions of higher learning in the state of Odisha.

Key Words: Higher Education, Women, Gender, Violence, Colleges, Safe, Environment

Introduction

The safety of girls is a paramount concern on every college campus. Today, creating a safe and supportive campus community is both a responsibility and a challenge for college administrators and students alike. Institutions must offer a wide array of security features specifically for girls on their premises, facilitated by a dedicated security team. Many outstation students, who are enrolling in various courses, are leaving their homes and cities for the first time. Therefore, it is crucial for institutions to foster a comfortable and secure environment that makes them feel at home on campus. Women's safety on college campuses is a pressing issue today. A recent poll indicates that 86% of parents consider campus safety to be one of the most significant factors when selecting an institution. Nevertheless, incidents of sexual assault and rape investigations on college campuses are frequently making headlines across the nation.¹ The issue can only be addressed through awareness and prevention initiatives, open dialogue, and decisive action. Students should receive ongoing education about sexual assault and its prevention starting from school, so they become more

informed and vigilant, and are not hesitant to take preventive measures in the face of such distressing situations in the future. Additionally, initiatives like the Women's Campus Safety Program could be incorporated into the current curriculum. Such programs have the inherent ability to raise awareness not only among students but also within the broader community. Every individual, regardless of gender, should actively support this critical societal issue and speak out against any morally and ethically unacceptable behavior. This is a viable path toward fostering positive change regarding the safety and well-being of girls on college campuses. This article attempts analytical exposition of the Shaktishree scheme launched by newly elected BJP led government following a two and half a decade rule by the predecessor BJD government.²

The Scenario

In recent months, Odisha has experienced a series of alarming incidents involving female students at some of its leading educational institutions. From the unexplained deaths of two Nepali students at a private University to the recent controversies at Govt Colleges, there is an increasing concern regarding the safety of girl students and the apparent inaction of internal complaints committees (ICCs) that are supposed to protect their welfare. This situation has reignited public anxiety about the persistent harassment faced by female students and the silence that often follows the initial outcry. Despite the media coverage and attention from state authorities that these incidents have received, there appears to be minimal progress or transparency in the investigations. For example, the death of a Nepali student at private University sent shockwaves throughout the state. In response, the Odisha government established a three-member high-level investigation committee. Intense questioning, documentation, and scrutiny ensued, placing significant pressure on the institution.³ However, more than two and a half months later, there is still no indication of the investigation report. The circumstances surrounding the case remain unclear. Why has the committee's report not been disclosed? To compound the concern, another Nepali student from the same university died under mysterious circumstances in a hostel, two consecutive incidents that have not only shocked Odisha but have also drawn international attention and embarrassment. The turmoil at two govt institutions further contributes to the narrative—how safe are our daughters in these so-called premier institutions? After each outcry, there is a flurry of activity, statements, promises, brief investigations that yield no conclusions. The increasing trend of institutional negligence and the delayed or suppressed findings of investigation committees are fuelling public outrage and distrust⁴.

Gender Sensitisation for Women's Empowerment

Our nation, India, has earnestly embraced the challenge of modernizing its culture and traditions, enhancing its economy, reducing illiteracy and poverty, and improving the living standards of its citizens. The influence and roles of women are vital to the country's economic growth. Although the constitution grants equal rights to women, they are often treated differently in practice. Unfortunately, a girl child is still seen as unwanted and undesirable. Even today, girls receive less attention and care from their parents compared to boys. A nation cannot achieve development or thrive as a developed country without making efforts to empower women, which in turn encourages their participation in the country's economic progress. Addressing gender disparities can only be achieved through gender sensitization. Gender pertains to the behaviours, activities, and roles of males and females across all social contexts.

The concept of gender is socially constructed, dynamic in nature, and evolves with time and circumstances. In contrast, the concept of 'sex' is biological, describing physical characteristics that remain static. The term 'Sensitization' refers to the awareness that can be fostered to eliminate prejudices and discriminatory behaviours towards women and other marginalized groups in society.⁵

A comprehensive discussion is necessary for a clear and profound understanding of the aforementioned topic. There has long been a societal perception that males possess greater physical and mental strength, making them more suitable for warfare, hunting, and land clearing, while females are viewed as physically and mentally weaker, relegated to roles related to household duties, child care, and breastfeeding. This reflects a distinctly negative and discriminatory attitude towards the inherent capabilities and characteristics of both males and females.

Empowerment leading to Women's Education

College related gender-based violence is a worldwide concern that adversely affects children, families, and communities. This type of violence, driven by detrimental gender norms and inequality, manifests in physical, sexual, and psychological forms, occurring both within and around educational institutions. Violence directed at women and girls in educational environments leads to numerous challenges for children and their families, including school avoidance, underperformance, and dropout rates.⁶ This phenomenon incurs an annual cost of approximately \$17 billion for low- and middle-income nations. Educational systems are pivotal in preventing campus related gender-based violence and fostering positive outcomes. Colleges serve as a platform to alter behaviours, challenge societal norms, and encourage healthy, violence-free interactions between girls and boys.

Incorporating violence prevention into the curriculum

Colleges and universities are instrumental in shaping attitudes and behaviours, positioning them as essential venues for violence prevention.⁷ By embedding violence prevention within educational frameworks, schools can evolve into secure spaces where students can engage in open discussions about this issue, acquire vital communication skills, and comprehend the importance of addressing gender-based violence in promoting equality and respect. Integrating these discussions into the curriculum guarantees that students gain the knowledge and tools necessary to confront harmful norms and cultivate healthier relationships. Beyond curricular modifications, it is crucial for nations to enact and enforce laws and regulations that conform to global standards regarding Girls' protection and violence prevention.⁸ Consistent monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of these strategies can aid in identifying successful approaches and ensuring that colleges genuinely become safer environments for all students.

Govt of India Initiatives to Ensure a Secure Environment for Women on Campuses

UGC has mandated that students should receive a handbook upon admission that includes comprehensive information about the rules and regulations concerning the expected conduct and behavior. This handbook should provide the helpline numbers for ICC members, student counsellors, the anti-ragging cell, the proctor's office, medical emergencies, the health center, the canteen, and other university authorities to contact when needed. Professional counseling services must be accessible on campus to address students' psychological and emotional issues. The safety of women is a critical concern for everyone. Often, the choices for higher education are restricted by the perceived risks associated with leaving home for education. Consequently, initiatives by college and university administrations to enhance campus safety and facilities for women will promote their participation in higher education institutions. Therefore, infrastructural improvements will play a vital role in fostering a women-friendly campus.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) should guarantee easy access to fundamental sanitation and hygiene facilities for women, including clean, well-maintained, and fully operational separate restrooms equipped with 24-hour tap water supply, soap, covered dustbins, sanitary pad disposal bins, and vending machines in all buildings. Adequate sanitary staff should be assigned to maintain cleanliness and usability of these facilities at all times. The campus and surrounding areas should be well illuminated. Sports fields, playgrounds, and public parks should be equipped with floodlights. All roads and pathways on campus, as well as areas near the main library, hostels, and parking lots, must have sufficient street lighting. There should be no dark areas anywhere on the campus.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) ought to ensure dependable and consistent transportation services, including feeder buses, for all students, with particular attention to the safety of women students and female staff during their transit on campus. These services should extend into the late hours, accommodating those utilizing laboratories and libraries that remain open late. All campus buildings, public spaces, and infrastructural amenities, such as transport facilities, restrooms, footpaths, and entry and exit points, must be accessible and welcoming to students with disabilities. A sufficient number of female security personnel should be recruited from reputable security firms. Each campus should be equipped with a primary health care centre and an ambulance service to ensure the safety of women by providing access to primary and emergency health care services around the clock.

The establishment of boundary walls is crucial for safeguarding students, particularly in rural or isolated campus locations. Therefore, university and college premises must include boundary walls to prevent unauthorized access by outsiders. All public areas on campus, including streets, libraries, corridors, playgrounds, parks, sports facilities, laboratories, and parking lots, should be monitored by a centralized CCTV surveillance system to oversee the activities and conduct of students, staff, and visitors. A visitor pass system should be implemented at campus entry points. HEIs should construct additional hostels for women, ensuring that all female students in need of accommodation are provided with this option. Hostels should be designed to include modern amenities such as dining facilities, clean restrooms, self-service laundry equipped with washing machines, WIFI, lounges, and entertainment options for indoor games and reading areas. Nutritious and healthy food must be accessible in all college/university canteens and mess facilities, with regular quality checks conducted by food safety officials.

The administration ought to arrange self-defence classes or training camps for female students and staff on a consistent basis. Every educational institution, including colleges and universities, is required to establish an Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) in accordance with the legal stipulations of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013. The ICC is tasked with preventing incidents and addressing grievances, as well as investigating all sexual harassment complaints lodged by female students and staff, while complying with the regulations outlined in this Act. Details regarding the ICC, including its members, their contact information via phone and email, and the committee's roles and responsibilities, should be prominently displayed on the institution's website. This information should also be widely shared through posters or brochures placed in key locations, such as notice boards in all departments, offices, hostels, auditoriums, and sports facilities. Additionally, a copy of the Act should be made available on the institution's website. Complaint and grievance boxes should be installed in discreet areas throughout all buildings of the institution, and anonymous complaints must also be addressed. Universities are expected to uphold a zero tolerance policy regarding sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination on campus. In

this context, all necessary measures should be implemented, and standards should be adhered to as per the official gazette of India and the University Grant Commission (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal of Sexual Harassment of Women Employees and Students in Higher Educational Institutions) Regulation, 2015.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) should foster self-confidence in young women, enabling them to become achievers, leaders, and entrepreneurs, thereby empowering them both socially and economically. A significant emphasis must be placed on the development and promotion of a gender-inclusive curriculum to ensure equal career opportunities, regardless of gender. HEIs are required to implement robust measures to combat the stigmatization and secondary victimization of complainants or victims. This can be achieved through legal awareness lectures, workshops, seminars, and conferences designed to empower women to report any incidents of sexual harassment or gender-based violence that they witness, learn about, or experience. In this context, HEIs may seek the assistance of legal counselors from the State Legal Service Authority (SLSA), District Legal Service Authorities (DLSA), or the law department, as well as legal advocacy groups and in-house legal counselors. Additionally, the campus community should consistently invite distinguished members of society, including professionals and representatives from the state, corporate, and civil sectors, who are recognized for their efforts in promoting gender equality within their respective domains.

Shaktishree Scheme in Parlance to other Initiatives

Soon after coming to power, the Odisha CM unveiled a new initiative called "Shaktishree", which is a comprehensive program designed to ensure the safety and security of female students in higher educational institutions throughout Odisha. This announcement comes in the wake of political turmoil following the tragic self-immolation of a college student, who sought justice for alleged sexual harassment but was denied. The initiative was rolled out across all 16 state-run universities and 730 government-run and government-aided colleges. It introduces eight essential measures, including the establishment of Shaktishree Empowerment Cells, the launch of a dedicated mobile application, and the installation of 24/7 CCTV surveillance systems. The CM said during the announcement of the program that Odisha has adopted a non-negotiable policy for the protection and respect of women. The Shaktishree Initiative will act as a robust platform to ensure a safe environment for female students in our colleges and universities."

As part of the program, each institution will set up a Shaktishree Empowerment Cell, which will be managed by female students and faculty members. A "Shaktishree Sathi" (student representative) and a "Shaktishree Sanjojika" (female teacher) will oversee the cell, with support from five distinguished working women designated as "Shakti Appa (sisters)" who will serve as mentors. The Shaktishree Empowerment Cell will focus on the safety and empowerment of female students, teachers, and staff within colleges and universities. The cell will conduct a six-day training program, dividing students into various groups for training sessions. Participants will receive education on legal rights and mental health, in addition to self-defense training. A significant aspect of the initiative is the Shaktishree Mobile App, which will allow students to confidentially report complaints via text, audio, or video messages. The app features an SOS button for emergency assistance and connects users with mental health professionals. Additionally, the app will provide access to the Tele-MANAS scheme offered by the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. The initiative comprises eight essential components as outlined below:

Shaktishree Empowerment Cell

The Shaktishree Empowerment Cell is a student-led, permanent body that will operate year-round in all higher education institutions across the state. This initiative will be overseen by the Shaktishree Sanjojika (a female faculty member) and the Shaktishree Saathi (a female student) from the same institution. The purpose of the cell is to cultivate a sense of security and empowerment among female students and staff (both teaching and non-teaching) within the institution. A mandatory '6-Days Intensive Training Programme' will be conducted batch-wise, complemented by year-round activities aimed at empowering young female students on an individual basis. The district collector will select five esteemed female professionals as 'Shakti Apas' to serve as mentors for the institution's students, with visits scheduled every three months.

Shaktishree Mobile Application

This mobile application is anticipated to be a ground-breaking resource for improving the safety and welfare of girl students and female staff at colleges and universities throughout the state. The app will allow students to report incidents through text, audio, or video messages, with an option for anonymity, linking directly to the head of the institution's internal complaints Committee (ICC). It will provide ICC guidelines for easy reference and awareness, serving as a repository of essential rules, laws, and rights for girl students and female employees. Additionally, it will include the contact information for the institution's ICC. For students facing stress or anxiety, the app will offer the ability to book free counseling sessions with professionally trained mental health counsellors. Furthermore, it will connect users to Tele-MANAS, a national initiative by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare that offers mental health support. An integrated SOS button will allow users to request immediate assistance in emergencies, directly linking them to the Shaktishree Saathi and the Shaktishree Sanjojika. Moreover, the app will provide details about Local Committees (LC) in various districts, enabling students to escalate their complaints if they believe their issues are not being adequately addressed by the ICC at their institution. The Higher Education Department will issue further Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for the resolution and monitoring of these complaints.

Code of Conduct for Staff

A detailed Code of Conduct will be established and made compulsory for all teaching and non-teaching personnel in higher education institutions (HEIs). As part of this effort, every staff member will need to complete an annual online training module. This initiative aims to greatly improve awareness of gender sensitization, women's safety, and professional ethics among both teaching and non-teaching staff within these institutions.

SAFE Campaign

The SAFE (Shaktishree Actions for Female Empowerment) Campaign is a thorough initiative designed to foster gender sensitization and empower women through increased awareness. The campaign will host gender sensitization awareness programs biannually, aligning with important dates that focus on women's empowerment and safety. It will feature a range of activities, including self-defense workshops, awareness campaigns on women's rights, safety drills, and motivational talks by experts, all aimed at encouraging active involvement from all stakeholders while challenging gender stereotypes, promoting respect, and ensuring a safe environment for women.

Annual Report on Campus Safety

In line with the Shaktishree initiative, an Annual Campus Safety Report will be submitted by all HEIs by December 31 each year. This report will be vital in maintaining a safe and secure environment. It

will include detailed information on campus safety measures, incidents and complaints reported, actions taken, crime prevention strategies, emergency response protocols, and gender-specific safety initiatives.

Installation of CCTVs

The installation of CCTV cameras will be implemented in all Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to ensure continuous monitoring, accompanied by a dedicated control room in each college. This initiative is a vital part of the overall safety and security strategy. CCTVs will be positioned at key locations determined by ICC members and the Shaktishree Empowerment Cell.

Online Capacity Building

Online courses will be available on the POSH Act, 2013, and UGC Regulations, 2015.

Shakti Swarupini

The annual one-day workshop will gather all Shaktishree Saathis and Shaktishree Sanjogikas from the state. This event aims to enhance their roles as change agents through brainstorming sessions, training on various legal matters and provisions, case studies related to their case management, and the utilization of the Shaktishree Mobile App for safety and empowerment. Participants will gain valuable insights into legal rights, self-defense strategies, and digital resources, empowering them to confidently serve as trainers and active members of the Shaktishree Empowerment Cell. These workshops will not only boost individual confidence but also foster a culture of proactive safety and gender awareness among college girls, thereby contributing to a more inclusive and equitable society.

Analytical Exposition and Observation

The education of girls is a crucial element for societal growth and empowerment. Yet, in numerous areas, including urban locations like Kanpur, concerns about safety pose a major obstacle to girls' access to education. Fears related to harassment, violence, and road safety often prevent parents from allowing their daughters to attend school. In many instances, these apprehensions are based on genuine threats, as girls face the risk of gender-based violence both during their commute to school and within the school premises. Furthermore, insufficient security measures in educational settings worsen these issues, rendering the journey to school perilous for young girls.⁹ This study investigates how safety culture is fostered on university campuses, with a particular emphasis on the impact of Shaktishree initiatives on the security of women and the overall welfare of students. By employing a mix of research techniques, including surveys, interviews, and observations, a comprehensive understanding of the effects of Shaktishree programs was achieved. The findings reveal a significant positive correlation between the execution of Shaktishree and the sense of safety felt by female students on campus.¹¹ Additionally, the qualitative analysis provides in-depth insights into the various strategies employed by Shaktishree, such as awareness campaigns, resource distribution, and community participation, all of which contribute to a safer and more nurturing campus environment.¹² These results underscore the necessity of taking proactive measures towards safety and highlight the essential role of community involvement in cultivating a robust safety culture within educational institutions.

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