

Women Politics in Odisha : Trends and Challenges

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There was a big gap between men and women in Odisha in electoral field during the pre - independence era. This can be inferred from the fact that none of the three ministry of Odisha during the Pre-Independence Assembly period, i.e., from 1936 to 1947 included any women, although Sarala Devi and Punya Prabha Devi were elected from the Cuttack town constituency, A. Laxmi Bai was elected from the Brahamapur constituency. But in the link assembly from 1947 to 1952 among the women legislators Smt. A. Laxmi Bai was the Deputy Speaker of the Odisha Legislative Assembly from 29.05.1946 to 20.02.1952 and Smt. Basant Manjari Devi was the Deputy Minister of Health in the Harekrushna Mahatab Ministry, who assumed the charge of office on 23rd April, 1946.

After the Independence of India there had been a spectacular increasing in the political participation of women in Odisha. Many of them contested in the elections to the Assembly and Lok Sabha. A few of them were also appointed as the ministers both at the centre and in the states. But except Basant Manjari Devi, others were not very influential. The real powers continued to lay with the male politicians. Although Basant Manjari Devi, (queen mother or Rajmata of Ranpur) was a prominent women political personality during the post-Independence era, she lacked statewide

influence. Despite the fact that Basant Manjari Devi had been the Deputy Minister she was at best a “decorative piece” of the cabinet of H.K. Mahatab and Nabakrishna Chaudhury from 1946 to 1959. Up to the end of 1960’s the political scene of Odisha was dominated by male leaders like Harekrishna Mahatab, Biju Patnaik, Rajendra Narayan Singh Deo, Nabakrishna Choudhary and Biren Mitra.

The mid-term election to the Odisha Assembly was held in 1961. Smt. Saraswati Pradhan, a Congress Party candidate was elected from Bhatali constituency of Sambalpur district. She was inducted into Biju Patnaik’s Cabinet as a Deputy Minister of Education.^[3] Smt Saraswati Pradhan was again inducted as a Deputy Minister of Education in the Biren Mitra’s government on 2nd October, 1963. She also served in the Ministry of Sadasiv Tripathy as the Deputy Minister of Education as before. Smt. Saraswati Pradhan served as a Deputy Minister in the three Ministries of Biju Patnaik, Biren Mitra and Sadasiv Mishra from 1961 to 1967, but she was not promoted to the Minister of state or Cabinet rank. The fact is that Smt. Saraswati Pradhan was appointed only to fill up the women quota in the ministry.

Smt. Anang Manjari Devi, a Jana Congress candidate from Sukinda constituency,

Smt. Swaraswati Pradhan of the Congress party from Bhatli constituency and Smt. Ratna Prabha Devi, a Swatantra candidate from Dhenkanal constituency were elected in the elections of 1967 to the Odisha Assembly. The Swatantra–Jana Congress, Swatantra–Jana Congress Ministry did not include any women from the elected women legislators from their respective parties.

In the mid-term elections to the Odisha Assembly of 1971 although 12 women candidates contested, none of them were elected to the Odisha Legislative Assembly. But Smt. Nandini Satpathy, then a Union Minister of state became the Chief Minister of Odisha though she was not a Member of Assembly.^[4] Smt. Nandini Satpathy was the first woman Chief Minister of Odisha. Later on she was elected to the Assembly from Cuttack Constituency on 26.11.1972 in a bye election.^[5]

In the 1974 mid-term elections Nandini Satpathy formed her second ministry on March 6, 1974. Other women candidates such as Sairindri Nayak, Subhansu Malini Ray of Congress and V. Sugyan Kumari Deo of Utkal Congress were elected to the Assembly. But none of them were included in the ministry of Smt. Satpathy. The Binayak Acharya Ministry that assumed charge of office on 29th December 1976 also did not induct any woman minister. Nilamani Routray, took over the administration of the state on June 26, 1977. Eventhough, out of seven women legislators five were elected from Janata party, Routray Ministry did not include any woman minister.

In the 1980 elections to the Odisha Legislative Assembly 5 women members were elected. Sri J.B Patnaik inducted Smt. Saraswati Hembram, as a Deputy Minister of Child Development and Rural Reconstruction. Smt. Hembram continued as a deputy minister till the

end of the J. B. Patnaik's first tenure of Chief Minister. In the 1985 Assembly elections 7 women members were elected to the Odisha Assembly. Never before such large number of women candidates were elected to the House. Miss Frida Topno was inducted as the Minister of State for Fisheries and Animal Husbandry in the second Ministry of J.B. Patnaik in 1985. J.B.Patnaik reshuffled his Ministry on 22nd July 1986. He inducted Smt. Parama Pujari and Smt Saraswati Hembram as Deputy Ministers. Smt Pujari was given the portfolio of Child Development and Rural Reconstruction while Smt Parama Pujari was given the portfolio of Harijan & Tribal Welfare. Shri Hemananda Biswal became the leader of the Congress Legislature Party and he took over as Odisha's Chief Minister on 5th December, 1989. He included all the women ministers of J.B.Patnaik's Cabinet.

In the March 1990 elections seven women members were elected to the Odisha Assembly. Except Congress legislator, Smt. Nandini Satpathy, all others were elected from Janata Dal Dal ticket. But Biju Patnaik inducted only Dr. Kamala Das as a Minister of state for Education and Youth Services (Primary and Adult Education) into his Cabinet. In the 1995 elections to the Odisha Assembly eight women members were elected. Among them Smt. Nandini Satpathy, Parama Pujari, Usha Rani Panda, Bijayalaxmi Sahu, and Saraswati Hembram were the prominent and high-flying members having previous political experience. But Shri J.B. Patnaik inducted only one woman member, Smt. Bijayalaxmi Sahoo, in his Cabinet, and was given the portfolio of Women and Child Development. On 9th February, 1999 J.B.Patnaik resigned from his office and he was succeeded by Giridhar Gamango. He inducted Smt. Usha Rani Panda, Smt. Parama Pujari, Smt. Swaraswati Hembram and Smt. Bijayalaxmi Sahoo in his cabinet in

February, 1999. But after super cyclone of October 1999 he was removed from his post and Shri Hemananda Biswal succeeded him. He retained all the women ministers of the Gomango Ministry without leaving any one of them.

Shri Naveen Patnaik assumed the charge of office of the BJD-BJP coalition government on 5th March, 2000. Fourteen women members were elected to the Assembly for the first time. This was the highest number of women members ever elected to the Assembly. Shri Naveen Patnaik inducted two women ministers in his cabinet. Dr. Kamala Das was included in the ministry as the Cabinet Minister of Health, Family Welfare, Women & Child Development and Smt. Draupadi Murmu as a Minister of state for Commerce and Transport. But in 2002 he dismissed Dr Kamala Das from his Ministry on the charges of corruption and after the reshuffle of the Ministry on 6th August 2002 he included Bishnupriya Behera in his Ministry as the Minister of state for Women and Child Development. He also suspended Smt. Kumudini Patnaik, Member of Parliament from Aska constituency, in April, 2002 to avert a possible split in the Parliamentary party. In order to prevent a formal split in the Parliamentary Party, Bishnu Priya Behera, Shri Padmanav Behera were accommodated in the ministry. The suspension of Kumudini Patnaik assumed significant, as she was the wife of senior B.J.D leader and former Finance Minister, Shri Ramkrishna Patnaik. Angry with the Chief Ministers' decision to shift him from Finance to Agriculture Minister, Shri Ramakrishna Patnaik had resigned from the BJD-BJP ministry. In a mark of revolt the Patnaik couple resigned from the BJD and joined the opposition Congress Party.

The 2004 election elected 11 women members Shri Naveen Patnaik inducted Smt.

Pramila Mallik,(BJD) as the Cabinet Minister of Women & Child Development and Smt. Surama Padhy,(BJP) as the Minister of state for Cooperation. ^[7] The trend of the 2009 Assembly Election in Odisha was the poor representation of women candidates. This election saw just six women candidates making it to the State Assembly and none to Lok Sabha. The women members elected to Assembly were Pramila Mallik from Binjharpur, Anjali Behera from Hindol, Sipra Mallik from Kendrapada, V.Sugyana Kumari Deo from Kabisuryanagar, Usha Devi from Chikiti and Mamata Madhi from Chitrakonda. There were just 118 women candidates in the fray for 147 seats, the major culprits being the principal parties. The Biju Janata Dal had nominated just eight, while the Congress gave tickets to 14 women aspirants. The BJP nominated 14 too. Parties like CPI and CPI (M) did not nominate any women candidate at all. It is ominous for the cause of women empowerment in Odisha. Talking about the issue does not make any sense if political parties do not practice what they say. Not nominating adequate number of women candidates is an indicator in itself. ^[8] But after a couple of days of her induction into the ministry as the Minister of Women and Child Development Smt Pramila Mallik was asked to resign from the State Cabinet for her alleged involvement in *dal* scam. In the last week of May, 2012. Shri Naveen Patnaik recommended dismissal of Women and Child Development Minister Anjali Behera from the Ministry for her alleged support to Shri Pyarimohan Mahapatra.

Table -1

Number of Women Legislators with Percentage of Representation (1952-2009)

	1952	1957	1961	1967	1971
1974	1977	1980	1985	1990	1995
2000	2004	2009			

Total Assembly Seats	140	140	140	140	140	147	147	147	147	147	147	147	147	147
Women Representation	3	5	4	5	1	4	7	5	8	9	10	14	11	6
Percentage	2.14%	3.57%	2.85%	3.57%	0.71%	2.72%	4.76%	3.40%	5.44%	6.12%	6.80%	9.52%	7.48%	4.08%

Table-2

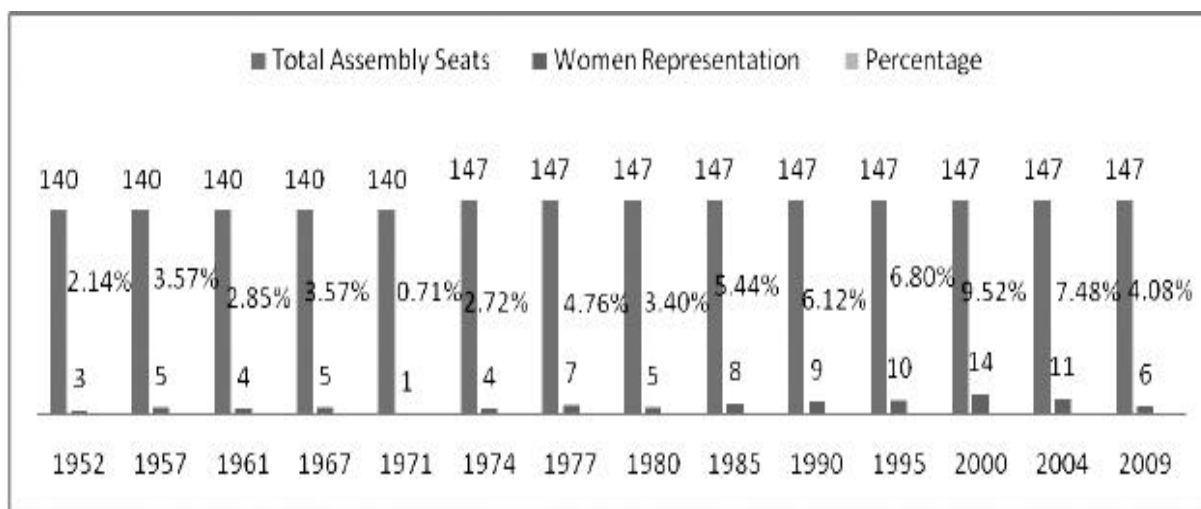


Chart-1

DISPLAY OF WOMEN REPRESENTATION IN PIE CHART

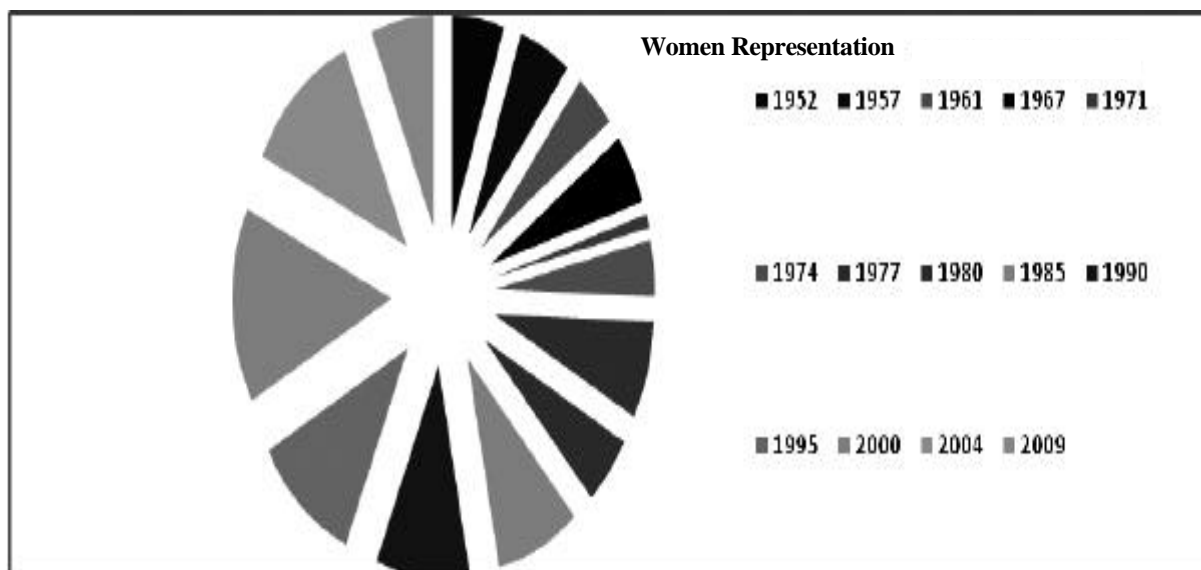
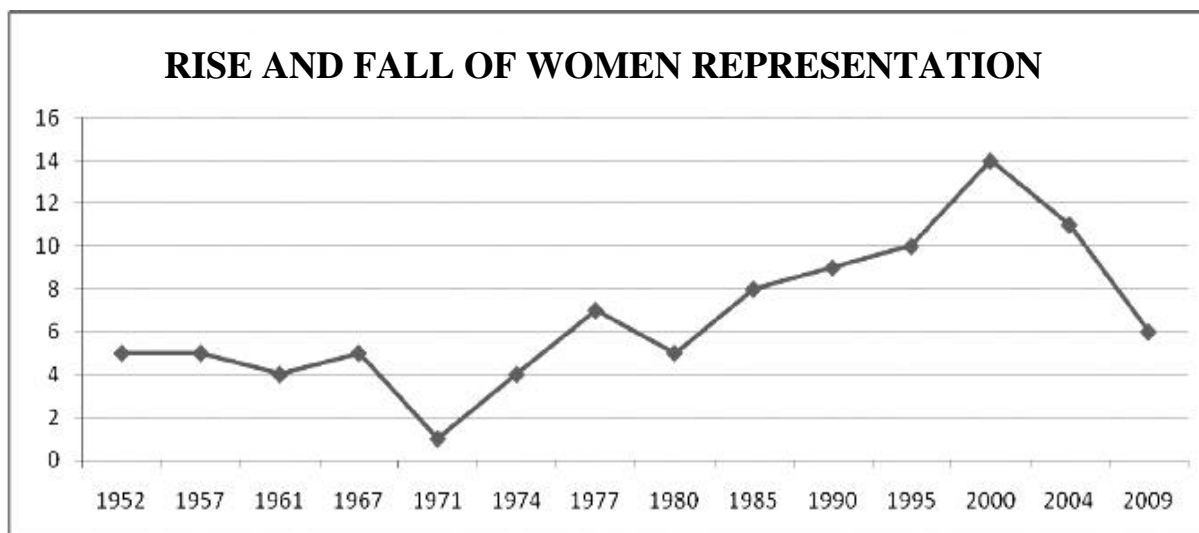


Chart-2



Trends of Women Politics in Odisha:

1. Parties hesitate to field women candidates:

Almost all parties hesitate to field women candidates. Hence the number of women candidates fielded by various political parties has always been very low as compared to their numbers in the population. Among women who manage to rise in the political echelons, in spite of their ability in administration and the art of political articulation, very few women reach the level of cabinet ministers.

2. Less Important Portfolios:

Mostly they remain deputy ministers or ministers of state. When women reach the few ministerial positions, they are generally assigned portfolios in the social service sectors of Health, Education, Social Welfare, Women and Child Development etc.

3. Most parties resorted to tokenism and symbolism:

Another trend of women representation in Odisha reveals that most parties resorted to

tokenism and symbolism when it came to representation of women. Women issues were not taken up by parties in a serious manner nor translated into programmes, policies and legislation nor were they mandated specifically to address issues of women.

4. Women Cells working as ancillary bodies:

Almost all political parties set up a women's cell or wing but they worked as ancillary bodies. Very few women were able to capture seats of power. The number of women in the legislatures remained very small. Very few women reached the position of party president or leader of legislative party.

5. Legacy of the Past :

The political mobilization and participation of women has been impressive in the Indian National Movement. They belonged to the elitist groups. It is worth-noting that the political mobilization of women and their participation in elections has steadily increased since the first General Elections of 1952. Women like A.Laxmibai, Subhadra Mahtab, Kiran Lekha Mohanty, Sarala Devi, Saraswati Devi joined real politics during this period.

6. The elite and high castes groups:

Women legislators elected from Odisha to State Assembly and Parliament so far, mostly belonged to the elite and high caste groups.

The Kshatriyas (rulers of ex- princely states) have contributed the largest number of women legislators. The noticeable supremacy of Kshayatriya women over other women in the field of politics is mainly due to the feudal ruling backdrop and influential temperament. It is imperative to note that up to 1971 not a single Brahmin woman could be elected as an MLA despite the fact that it as one of the “Dominant Castes” of the state. It was after only in 1972 the Brahmins, Karans and Khandayats entered into politics. The fate of OBC women representatives is also miserable.

7. Representation through Reservation:

Due to the introduction of reservation in representation, some scheduled caste women and scheduled tribe women are getting involved in politics. Some of them are elected MLAs and MPs as a result of the reservation policy of the government. It is important to note that the election success of scheduled caste or scheduled tribe women is merely symbolic. They are just “token elites” without exercising any power. Most parties resorted to tokenism and symbolism when it came to representation of women. It is clear

visible in case of scheduled caste and scheduled tribe representation.

8. Mostly through family dynasties or through male political patronage :

Another trend can be easily noticed that it is the elite and politicized families from which there is a smooth entry for women in politics. Women playing supportive roles to males in the family and emerging from their shadows have also found easy entry.

9. Widows’ succession-Entry of widows of prominent political figures :

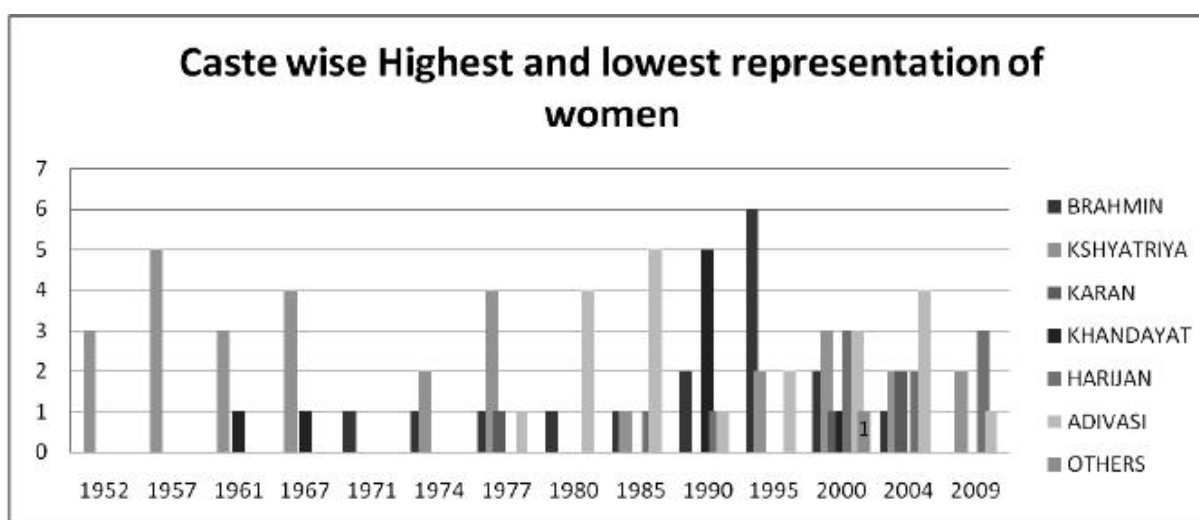
Another trend has been the entry of widows of prominent political figures into politics and positions of power. Some widows of the departed MLAs have also got the party tickets in order to contest in the bye-elections. Smt. Patta Nayak wife of ex-Minister Sri Trinath Nayak and their daughter Anjali Behera, Smt. Ratna Manjari Devi wife of Raja Sisir Kumar Narendra Deb, Shanti Devi, wife of Shri Ananta Narayan Singh Deo, Usha Devi, wife of Shri Trigunateeta Deb of Chikiti, V. Sugnana Kumari Deo, wife of Purna Chandra Mardaraj Deo and daughter in law of Ramchandra Mardaraj of Khallikote royal family, Mandakini Behera, wife of ex MLA Sri Bhagabat Behera, Usharani Panda, wife of ex-Minister Sri Sarat Chandra Panda etc have entered politics through this family legacy.

Table-3 : Caste-wise representation of Women Legislators

YEAR	Brahmin	Kshyatriya	Karan	Khandayat	Scheduled Caste	Scheduled Tribe	Others	Total
1952		3						03
1957		5						05
1961		3		1				04
1967		4		1				05
1971	1							01
1974	1	2		1				04
1977	1	4	1			1		07

1980	1					04		05
1985	1	1			1	5		08
1990	2			5	1	1		09
1995	6	2				2		10
2000	02	3	1	1	3	3	1	14
2004	01	2	2		2	4		11
2009		2			3	1		06
TOTAL	16	31	04	09	10	21	01	92

Chart-3



9. No tribal representation outside reservation:

Odisha has 33 seats out of the 147 in the legislative assembly reserved for tribals. At the parliament level, five of the total 21 seats are reserved for ST candidates. Historically, political parties have never fielded more than an insignificant number of women from these seats. But when women candidates have been given a chance, they have won - not just once, but twice and thrice - proving that they too can master the 'winnability factor'. Saraswati Hembrum, Frida Topno, Sushila Tiriya, Hema Gamang, Draupadi Murmu were examples in this regard.

10. Poor Representation in Parliament:

The representation of Odia women in the Parliament election is very miserable. It is pertinent

to note that till 1980 not a single women from Odisha was elected to the Lok Sabha. It was only in 1980 Smt. Jayanti Patnaik, wife of former Chief Minister; Shri J. B. Patnaik was elected to the Lok Sabha. Since 1980 only ten women so far have been elected to the Lok Sabha and since 1952 ten women have been elected to the Rajya Sabha.

11. Frequency is very low:

The total number of women MLAs elected to the Legislative Assembly between 1936 and 2009 was 56. Among them 36 women MLAs were elected for one time, 10 women MLAs were elected twice, 5 women MLAs were elected thrice, 3 women MLAs were elected four times, 1 women MLAs was elected for seven times and 1 women MLAs was elected for 9

times. Among them V.Sugyan Kumari Devi had been elected for 9 times and this is the highest number of frequency in Odisha legislative

Assembly in terms of winning the election and representing the state legislature by a women. Next to her Nandini Satpathy had won 7 times.

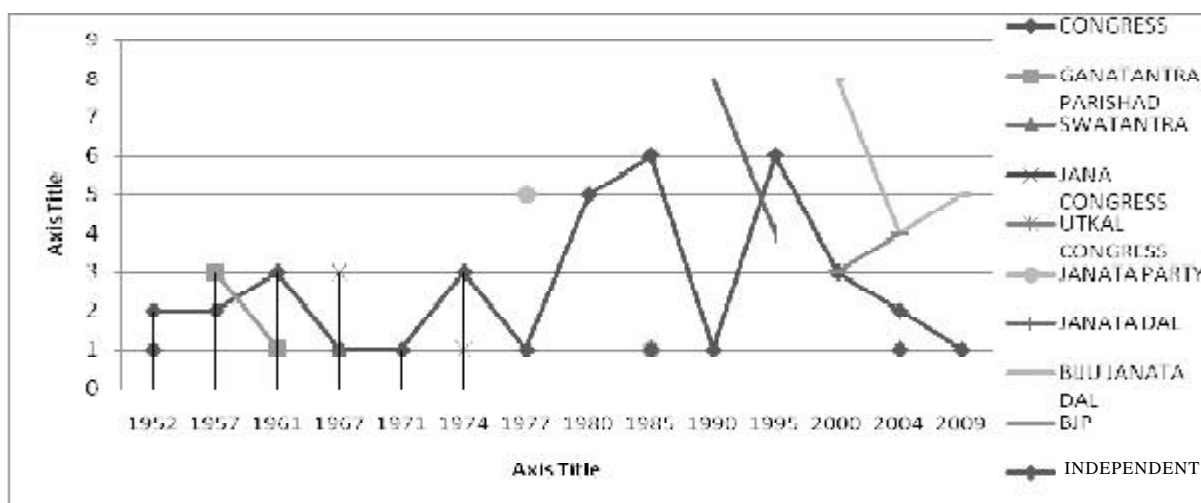
Table-4

Party wise representation of women

YEAR	Congress	Ganatantra	Swatantra Parishad	Jana Congress	Utkal Congress	Janata Party	Janata Dal	BJD	BJP	Others total /Ind	
1952	2									1	03
1957	2	3									05
1961	3	1									04
1967	1		1	3							05
1971	1										01
1974	3				1						04
1977	1					5				1	07
1980	5										05
1985	06					01				01	08
1990	01						08				09
1995	06						04				10
2000	03							08	03		14
2004	02							04	04	01	11
2009	1							5			06
Total	37	04	01	03	01	06	12	17	07	04	92

Chart-4

Party-wise representation of women to Odisha Legislative Assembly



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