

Maternal Health Program in Jaleswar Block of Balasore District, Odisha: A Critical Assessment in a Vulnerable Area

ABSTRACT

Odisha is classified as a 'high focus' state under the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) on account of its high Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR). The study attempts to appraise maternal health program (called *Janani Suraksha Yojana*) offered by the Government in the remote Jaleswar block of Balasore district. This region has high concentration of poor tribal population and is also characterized by geographical inaccessibility due to seasonal floods, making it 'vulnerable'. The study focuses on assessment of infrastructural capacity, challenges faced by community workers called Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs), problems in integrating indigenous medicine, and in implementing Health Management Information System (HMIS). Community receptivity to the program is also assessed. The findings reveal that the block widely deviates from recommended safe practices and protocols on maternal health. An infrastructural assessment using the *Parijata Tool* shows that public health facilities in Jaleswar do not comply with minimum standards set by the World Health Organization. Further, the study finds that there is deficiency in knowledge, skills and training of ASHAs. Much needs to be done to improve their capacity to deal with tribal women. Overall, Maternal Health program mainly adopts the biomedical paradigm, and there is poor integration of indigenous medicine. Finally, assessment of HMIS shows that it fails to generate information for local application. In short, the study shows that the state of Odisha has attempted a highly standardized Maternal Health program without considering local needs and birthing practices. It concludes by suggesting remedial measures for improving maternal care for vulnerable communities by incorporating culture-specific practices.

Keywords: *Tribal health, maternal health, infrastructure, ASHA, AYUSH, HMIS, culture-specific care*