

Political Empowerment Of Women Through Self-Help Groups

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ABSTRACT

Self-help groups (SHGs), comprising 10-20 women from similar socio-economic backgrounds, voluntarily unite to address shared challenges, aiming for the persistent advancement of women's socio-economic and political interests through collective action. These groups not only nurture a culture of thrift among rural women but also provide low-interest loans from their collective pool, without requiring collateral. In the Indian context, Self-Help Groups (SHGs) play a commendable role in alleviating poverty by reaching out to rural women. They actively participate in grassroots women's empowerment. Recognizing the importance of women's empowerment, the Government of India has adopted the Bangladesh model of SHGs to uplift poor rural women. As a result, SHGs act as instrumental for empowerment of women in different aspects of their lives. This paper seeks to ascertain political dimension of women empowerment through SHGs in Arunachal Pradesh.

Key words: *Self-help groups, Socio-economic, Women's empowerment, Collective action, Poverty alleviation.*

INTRODUCTION

India is the largest democracy in the world; women constitute half of its population. Nevertheless, their involvement in socio-economic and political spheres remains unsatisfactory, despite constitutional provisions ensuring equality and opportunities. Various factors—religious, social, cultural, and economic—contribute to the underrepresentation of women in these critical dimensions. Given the inadequate representation of women in every critical sector and at every level of the decision-making process, the empowerment of women becomes paramount.¹ The process of empowerment is multifaceted and allows a person to realize their full potential in all aspects of their lives. Empowerment is granting power, and power means possessing the ability to manage its own affairs and achieve its goals without relying on external assistance. The primary source of empowerment is the word 'power'. Throughout social and political theory, the idea of power has been most prevalent. There are various ways to comprehend power: power over, power to, power with, and power within (Oxaal& Baden). Empowerment refers to the capacity of individuals and groups to take action to protect their own interests or to participate in decisions that affect them. Women being a significant part of society, it's a prerequisite for the empowerment of women for sustainable development. Women have an equal right to participate in every economic institution and decision-making body alongside men. Their presence in these critical spheres of life underscores the elimination of gender-based discrimination in various fields and challenges the stereotypical roles set for women in society.

According to Sen and Grown, women can be empowered by altering the laws and social systems that grant men greater authority than women. This includes improving the treatment of women in social institutions such as government and education, revising laws related to property and inheritance, and ensuring women have control over their own decisions and bodies. Women's empowerment refers to giving women greater authority and

¹Syamala Devi, D., and Lakshmi, G., Political Empowerment of Women in the Indian Legislature: A Study, Indian Journal of Political Science, Vol. LXVI, No. 1, January–March 2005, p. 77.

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opportunities to make decisions about their own lives and their ability to achieve their desired goals.² It refers to how women acquire access to and control over material, intellectual, and human resources. In the process of women's empowerment, all legal rights are restructured and redistributed to counter patriarchal ideologies and male dominance. Politically, women's empowerment is a crucial component of the overall development process. Therefore, women's participation in economic activities can lead to their political empowerment.³ Women's active engagement in economic institutions and the political system would reduce the chronic disease of poverty. Moreover, provide equality and opportunities for them, which are crucial for national growth and development as a whole.

Economic independence marks the initial step towards women's empowerment (Manisha D. Bhingardive, 2014). Economic empowerment serves as a primary tool for women's empowerment. Karl Marx, the eminent political thinker of his era, advocated for women's employment to be liberated from economic dependence on their husbands, thereby breaking free from male dominance within the family.⁴ Economic empowerment is the most important dimension, among others, because it serves as the foundation for all other forms of empowerment.

The government of India, recognizing the necessity of women's empowerment, has initiated various welfare schemes aimed at uplifting rural women from poverty. In this respect, in the five-year plans, priority has been given to the social welfare sector in order to assist rural women. A significant focus of the Ninth and Tenth Five-Year Plans is on strengthening the Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA) and Self-Help Groups (SHGs). Subsequently, all rural development initiatives were consolidated into the Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY) program, which has been implemented since April 1999.⁵ Since then, the SHGs Programme has been implemented by the Indian government with the aim of empowering women. Hence, among various welfare schemes, SHGs are one of the most significant, as they not only ensure employment opportunities but also act as a source of empowerment for women in rural areas. Through this initiative, women from underrepresented groups—schedule cast (SC), schedule tribe (ST), other backward classes (OBC), and minorities—engage in economic activities and are able to support their families, resulting in improved social status have improved.

Political Empowerment

During the Freedom Struggle movement, women actively participated in political movements against British rule, both formally and informally. Among these participants, a significant portion came from elite backgrounds. Indian history shows that elite women played a prominent role in the Indian freedom renaissance, actively engaging in movements led by Mahatma Gandhi. From the non-violent protests against the Rowlatt Acts in 1921–22 to the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930–31, the Satyagraha Movement of 1941, and the Quit India Movement, women are actively involved with the goals of exposing social evil practices like female infanticide, child marriage, and all kinds of atrocities against women.⁶

After independence, women were granted essential rights in the form of fundamental rights and directive principles in the constitution, which guaranteed them justice, liberty, equality, and dignity. Regardless of the constitutional rights, only a limited number of women engage in political. The political system gains effective legitimacy when citizens exercise their right to vote and participate in the electoral process. It also holds the

² B. Revathy & M. Kailash, 'Self-Help Groups Catalyst for Women Empowerment, Adhyaya Publisher & Distributors, New Delhi (India), 2014

³ Gooru Sreeramulu P. Hushenkhan, 'Political Empowerment of Women Through Self-Help Groups (SHGs): A Study in Andhra Pradesh' The Indian Journal of Political Science, Vol. LXIX, No. 3, 2008, p. 609.

⁴ Ram Krishna Mandal and Minto Ete, 'Women in North East India, role and status of Arunachal Women', Mittal Publication New Delhi (India) 2010, p. 3.

⁵ National Bank, NABARD, Annual Report, Mangalore, 1990-1991, P 19.

⁶ Swarnjayanthi Gram Swarozgar Yojna, Guidelines Government of India, Ministry Of Rural Development, New Delhi, p. 12.

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person in charge accountable.⁷ India being the largest democracy in the world, the success of democracy now relies on the active participation of women in the electoral process. Therefore, the 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts were introduced; this act marks a turning point for women's political empowerment. This constitutional amendment has made it possible for more women to participate and engage in politics by requiring a 33 percent reservation of seats for women in local government bodies.

SELF-HELP GROUPS(SHG)

A self-help group (SHG) is comprised of 10–20 members from the same homogeneous background who willingly come together to form a group with the objective of nurturing the habit of small savings among members. They regularly pool their savings and provide loans to members with very minimal interest. The primary aim of SHGs is to ensure economic empowerment among various local poor women in the country. The concept of SHGs originated in Bangladesh in 1975, initiated by Professor Muhammad Yunus. He introduced a new approach through Grameen Bank, which provided loans to the poor rural population without requiring collateral. In India, the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) initiated SHGs in 1986–87, but significant progress was made after 1991–92 when SHGs were linked with banks. Presently, SHGs address issues of poverty alleviation and the empowerment of the poor, especially rural women, in areas such as health, nutrition, and other support services.⁸ In recent years, the Self-Help Groups (SHGs) program has gained significant importance. Through the implementation of the SHGs program, women have been actively engaged in economic activities, enabling them to reduce their economic dependence on their husbands.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study are follows; -

1. To ascertain whether Self-Help Groups (SHGs) contribute to women's political empowerment in Arunachal Pradesh.
2. To offer valuable suggestions for speeding up the political empowerment of women in Arunachal Pradesh through Self-Help Groups (SHGs).

STATEMENT OF PROBLE

The nature of society is a patriarchal system; women's status in Arunachal Pradesh is more or less similar to other parts of the world. Women's limited involvement in socio-economic and political matters has impacted their status in the state. Arunachal Pradesh is a patriarchal society; women's concerns about issues that affect them and the society as a whole have not received the attention they deserve, despite the fact that over time the status of women in the state has improved significantly due to constitutional provisions, the expansion of education, and the enactment of legislative measures. Consequently, women continue to be dependent on men in a variety of ways. For example, the 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts were introduced with the intention of strengthening women in grassroots politics; nevertheless, the goal has not yet been achieved. According to studies, male family members frequently have important decision-making power, even while women hold roles in local organizations. Additionally, the State Legislative Assembly has only 5 female legislators out of 60 seats, meaning that only 5% of women are represented in state politics. Moreover, economic empowerment is the first step towards achieving social and political empowerment for women. Therefore, economic empowerment is a prerequisite for overall women's empowerment. Amidst this understanding, SHGs have emerged as one of the strongest agents working to empower women in the country, notably those in rural areas that are most susceptible owing to a lack of education. Women are empowered by self-help groups in a variety of domains, including political, social, and economic ones. SHGs have played a crucial role in eradicating poverty in rural areas

⁷ Ibid. p. 610.

⁸ Hussain, et al 'Impact of Self-Help Group on Livelihood of Rural Tribal Women in East Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh' International Journal of Bioresource Science, 2017, pp.73-74.

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and providing opportunities for women to engage in self-sufficient economic activities, hence promoting their economic empowerment. As a result, through group action for development, women's empowerment through SHGs helps not only individual women but also families and communities at large. Currently, according to the NRLM official website, 9,341 self-help groups (SHGs) with 73,904 female members functioning throughout 26 districts in the state of Arunachal Pradesh are registered under the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) program. In Arunachal Pradesh, self-help groups (SHGs) have been involved in activities such as vocational training, education, and joint efforts to reduce poverty. By producing revenue via ventures like vermicomposting, floriculture, fungiculture, piggery, and small enterprises, they aid in the growth of the state.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study draws its data from secondary sources, including material from official government websites and publicly available articles, both published and unpublished.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The researcher has selected different important indicators and variables of political empowerment in the context of the role of SHGs. Political empowerment involves examining factors such as election participation, awareness of voting rights, political involvement, membership in local bodies, participation in Gram Sabha meetings, involvement in village development decision-making processes, etc.

According to Roa, the participation of women in the political sphere and in the decision-making process is an important tool for empowerment. The degree of this involvement is keeping an eye on political performance standards across the board. In India, the participation of women in the political sphere has actually been limited since the days of the freedom struggle movement, while in many other countries, women's participation in political activities has improved. Political empowerment is an umbrella term that includes people's control over the state's power structure in addition to their involvement in a range of political activities and government decision-making processes.

The study has reported that the majority of members of SHGs are connected with political institutions, and their consciousness regarding political rights among the members has increased. Moreover, the participation of members during election campaigns has increased, although they are not affiliated with any political party. This increase is attributed to the monetary incentives involved during election time, making it a lucrative opportunity for earning money from contested candidates (Likha, 2016). The Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have a positive impact on increasing awareness of the role of political leaders among the members. This heightened awareness has, in turn, encouraged members to actively participate in the voting process during elections, suggesting that participation in SHGs can contribute to civic engagement and political awareness among community members. However, while members are exercising their voting rights and participating in election campaigns, their active involvement in developmental activities and participation in the monitoring process or social audit of development schemes, Gram Sabha meetings, and decision-making processes remain unsatisfactory.⁹ After joining SHGs, women are more aware of the leaders of their areas and some political institution structures.¹⁰ Despite having awareness, women's participation in the political sphere is limited at both the local and higher levels, which can impact policy decisions and government inclusivity.¹¹ Unsatisfactory representation of women in the political sphere is due to the fact that when women enter politics, they must fulfil a triple role that includes working in political institutions as well as at home, on a farm, or in business. Women have become deterred from actively participating in political institutions as a result of this high level of responsibility. Women's

⁹Likha Kiran Kabak, 'Empowerment of Women Through Self Help Groups in The Context of Rural Development Of Arunachal Pradesh An Empirical Study', 2016, P.1.

¹⁰ Ajay Pandey, 'The Role of Self-Help Groups in the Political Empowerment of Women: A Study of Lohit District of Arunachal Pradesh'. Emerging Researcher, Volume 9, Issue I, 2022, p. 31.

¹¹ Pandey, Norbu, and Yarang, 'Case Study of Tezu Block, Lohit District, Arunachal Pradesh,

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tripartite roles limit their ability to exercise and enjoy their rights at different phases of political processes. Their inability to receive support from their families and other support systems makes it difficult for them to carry out their duties as elected representatives. (Likha, 2016). Women's inactive participation in political decision-making and the social audit process in local bodies and developmental programs owing to cultural, gender, and media insensitivity, a lack of training and information, and other factors may still contribute to women's underrepresented engagement in politics.

Additional factors include a lack of women's active participation in politics. A woman facing discrimination often finds herself confined to domestic roles, with societal norms dictating her place solely within the home. Additionally, challenges such as poverty, domestic duties, child-rearing responsibilities, and a lack of education further burden her, leaving little time or energy for political engagement. Moreover, entrenched patriarchal values, limited access to education, political corruption, the high costs associated with elections, and deteriorating electoral processes further discourage women from engaging in political affairs.¹²

SUGGESTIONS

Women are capable of actively engaging in political activities, through which they can bring about desired changes for society. However, due to the patriarchal nature of the state, their potential is overlooked, with their roles often limited to household activities. By confining them within the four walls of the house, where they receive minimal exposure, their potential to effectively contribute to society as a whole is gradually weakened. With women constituting half of the state's population, their potential cannot be ignored. Therefore, various remedial methods are needed to address the persistent challenges faced by economically disadvantaged women when actively participating in political processes. Several suggestions could be considered to empower them and enhance their engagement.

- Plan recurring community awareness campaigns that inform women about their rights as citizens, the value of participating in decision-making, and the advantages of getting involved in politics.
- Provide capacity-building seminars and training sessions with the goal of empowering women to participate in politics with the knowledge, abilities, and self-assurance they need. These include developing public speaking and leadership skills as well as comprehending political systems and procedures.
- Create mentorship programs or support networks where seasoned female leaders may advise, uplift, and support prospective female lawmakers as they overcome the obstacles they may face.
- Make an attempt to challenge and change societal norms and deeply held patriarchal ideas that limit women's participation in politics. This can mean starting awareness campaigns, having community gatherings, and working on advocacy projects.
- To assist women in overcoming financial obstacles to political engagement, give them more access to microfinance programs or additional financial support. This could take the form of paying for their election campaigns or meeting expenses. Promote positive portrayals of women in politics through the media to challenge stereotypes and increase public acceptance of women's leadership roles in the political sphere.

By putting these recommendations into practice, women in rural areas can receive improved assistance and empowerment to help them get over obstacles that prevent them from actively engaging in political processes, which will ultimately lead to increased gender equality and inclusive governance.

CONCLUSION

SHGs play a crucial role in enhancing the lives of impoverished women in rural areas, serving as a vital resource for those navigating challenging socio-economic conditions. These groups facilitate opportunities for women to engage in diverse economic activities and vocational skill training, empowering them to contribute meaningfully

¹² Ibid, p. 29.

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to their families' financial well-being. Despite these advancements, studies have identified numerous obstacles hindering the political empowerment of rural women. Hence, it is imperative to address these issues and implement actionable suggestions to leverage the potential of SHGs as effective agents of grassroots democracy.

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