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## ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF SCHEDULED CASTE WOMEN THROUGH SELF-HELP GROUPS

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### OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY :

In 1975, Professor Muhammad Yunus of Chittagong University in Bangladesh pioneered the concept of microcredit, which is the provision of small loans to poor people to help them start or expand their businesses. The idea quickly gained traction, and in 1997, the World Microcredit Summit was held in Washington, DC. This summit brought together representatives from microcredit organizations from around the world and helped to raise awareness of the potential of microcredit to reduce poverty. In 2005, the United Nations declared the year 2005 as the International Year of Microcredit. This further helped to raise awareness of microcredit and its potential to improve the lives of the poor. In 2006, Professor Yunus and the Grameen Bank, the microfinance institution that he founded, were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their work in promoting microcredit (Gitanjali Behera, 2018).



**KEYWORDS :** *potential of microcredit , microfinance institution, Nobel Peace Prize.*

### INTRODUCTION :

Microcredit is based on the principle that even the poorest people have the potential to be successful entrepreneurs. By providing them with access to small loans, microcredit can help them to start or expand their businesses, which can lead to increased income and improved living standards. Microcredit can also help to empower women, who are often disproportionately affected by poverty. Self-help group organizations (SHGOs) are a type of microfinance institution that is specifically designed to help women. SHGOs provide women with access to microcredit, as well as training and support services. SHGOs have been shown to be effective in helping women to improve their lives and to reduce poverty. The history of microcredit is a story of innovation, collaboration, and success. Microcredit has the potential to make a real difference in the lives of the poor, and it is a movement that is worth supporting.

The empowerment of Scheduled Caste women is essential for the development of India. Scheduled Caste women make up a significant proportion of the Indian population, and they are disproportionately affected by poverty and discrimination. Scheduled Caste women are a marginalized group, and they face many challenges, including poverty, discrimination, and lack of access to education and employment. By empowering Scheduled Caste women, India can unleash the potential of this

group and contribute to the country's economic and social development. The empowerment of Scheduled Caste women is an important goal in India.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In Nairobi, Kenya, Marcel Fafchamps and Eliana La Ferrara (2012) undertook a study to explore the impact of self-help groups in informal settlements. Their research revealed compelling evidence of the valuable support provided by these groups. The results indicated a significant connection between the overall incomes and earnings within self-help groups, particularly among members belonging to the same group, rather than incomes earned independently. It is important to highlight that these self-help groups are formed by individuals with diverse income potentials.

In her 2014 study, Jyothi Guntaka investigates the socio-economic conditions of Dalit women and their journey towards empowerment through Self-Help Groups. The findings indicate that a majority of the women surveyed lack literacy skills. Despite living in nuclear families, they face male dominance within their households. The women's motivation to join SHGs stems from their fellow villagers. While they experience some economic empowerment upon joining, they still lack the independence to exercise full control over the funds generated through SHGs.

In their study, Ratna Ghosh et al. (2015) aim to assess the effectiveness of initiatives promoting women's empowerment in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Self-Help Groups (SHGs). The findings of the research indicate that although women's involvement in PRIs and SHGs provides some level of empowerment, it remains primarily surface-level. Despite participating, women lack genuine decision-making power and often comply with the instructions enforced upon them by male members of the Panchayat or society. As a result, they continue to be subordinate and generally refrain from challenging the various inequalities they face in their everyday lives, let alone confronting decisions made by male members of society.

In a study conducted by Thomas Davidson and Paromita Sanyal (2017) in India, the aim was to explore the impact of women's participation in Self-Help Groups (SHGs) on their social networks and social capital. The researchers gathered household survey data and obtained comprehensive social network information from seventy-five rural villages in Karnataka. The findings of the study reveal that despite encountering greater socioeconomic challenges compared to women and men who don't participate in SHGs, women involved in these groups exhibit significantly higher levels of incoming connections.

In their 2018 study, Abhijit Mohanty and Satya Prakash Mishra examined the operational procedures of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and their influence on the welfare of women residing in rural regions. The findings of the study revealed that SHGs in the Khurda and Bhubaneswar blocks exhibited increased savings as a result of improved earnings, which in turn attracted more individuals to join. The primary economic activities undertaken by women in these SHGs revolved around the collection and marketing of Minor Forest Products obtained from nearby forests.

Minati Sahoo and Arati Rout (2018) conducted a study to explore the influence of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) on rural livelihoods and the empowerment of women. The study's results reveal that SHGs have yielded beneficial outcomes for rural women, fostering their economic autonomy and enhancing their prospects for sustainable livelihoods. Participation in SHGs has significantly augmented women's engagement in income-generating endeavors.

In their study, Tripathy et al. (2021) analyzed the socioeconomic impact of the SHG model and the behaviors exhibited by the participants. The researchers also investigated the level of empowerment experienced by women who actively participated in SHG activities. The survey findings revealed that a significant number of respondents cited two main reasons for joining SHGs: initiating group activities and accessing financial support.

## OBJECTIVES & METHODOLOGY

The aim of the study is to examine economic empowerment of Scheduled Caste women through their participation in Self-help Groups. The study has examined whether participation in SHGs has

resulted in the increased income and savings, improved access to credit and financial services, enhanced control over assets and resources, reduced vulnerability to economic shocks and crises, increased economic decision-making power within household and knowledge of bank procedures.

The study is based on primary data collected through pre-tested interview schedule. Prakasam district of Andhra Pradesh is selected for the present study. As per the thumb rules, sample size of the study is determined as 500. Using a purposive sampling method, data was collected from four Mandals in Prakasam district with the highest number of Scheduled Caste women as members of the SHGs. Percentages are drawn to analyze the data.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

### Increased income and savings

The study has made an attempt to examine whether associating with Self-help Groups results in augmenting their income and savings. The results of the study are presented in Table – 1. It is evident from the data that Self-help groups (SHGs) have had a positive impact on the empowerment of Scheduled Caste women in terms of increased income and savings. A majority of respondents (39.4 per cent) agreed that SHGs have helped them to increase their income, while about 29 per cent strongly agreed. Only 10.2 per cent disagreed, and 1.8 per cent strongly disagreed. The findings of this study suggest that SHGs are an effective way to empower Scheduled Caste women. By providing access to financial resources and training, SHGs can help women to increase their income and savings, which can lead to improved social and economic status.

**Table - 1**  
**IMPACT OF SHGs ON INCREASED INCOME AND SAVINGS**

Opinion of the respondents	Number of respondents	Percentage
Strongly disagree	9	1.80
Disagree	51	10.20
Neutral	96	19.20
Agree	197	39.40
Strongly agree	147	29.40
Total	500	100.00

Source: Computed from the Primary Data

### Improved access to credit and financial services

The study has made an attempt to examine whether the participation in SHGs results in improved access to credit and financial services. Table – 2 shows the perceptions of the sample respondents on improved access to credit and financial services due to participation in the SHGs. The results of the study show that Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have had a positive impact on the empowerment of Scheduled Caste women in India. The majority of respondents (45.4 per cent) agreed that SHGs have improved their access to credit and financial services, while 28.6 per cent strongly agreed. This suggests that SHGs have helped to reduce the financial barriers that Scheduled Caste women face, which can enable them to improve their economic and social status. On the other hand, merely around 16 per cent of the respondents are strongly disagreed and around 10 per cent of the sample respondents are disagreed with the statement, while neutral response is received from merely 3 out of 500 sample respondents. Thus the study's findings suggest that SHGs can be an effective tool for empowering Scheduled Caste women economically. The study shows that SHGs provide women with access to credit and financial services. This can help women to start their own businesses, improve their existing businesses, or invest in their education.

**Table - 2**  
**IMPACT OF SHGs ON IMPROVED ACCESS TO CREDIT AND FINANCIAL SERVICES**

Opinion of the respondents	Number of respondents	Percentage
Strongly disagree	79	15.80
Disagree	48	9.60
Neutral	3	0.60
Agree	227	45.40
Strongly agree	143	28.60
Total	500	100.00

Source: Computed from the Primary Data

### Enhanced control over assets and resources

The study has attempted to examine whether associating with self-help groups (SHGs) has resulted in increased control over assets and resources for Scheduled Caste women. Table - 3 shows the results of study of SHG members on their opinion of the impact of SHGs on their control over assets and resources. The study found that about 63 per cent of respondents agreed and about 3 per cent of the respondents strongly agreed that SHGs had helped them to increase their control over assets and resources, while about 21 per cent disagreed and about 5 per cent of respondents strongly disagreed, and 6.8 per cent were neutral. These results suggest that SHGs have been effective in helping Scheduled Caste women to increase their control over assets and resources. This is an important step in empowering women, as it gives them more control over their own lives and livelihoods.

**Table - 3**  
**IMPACT OF SHGs ON ENHANCED CONTROL OVER ASSETS AND RESOURCES**

Opinion of the respondents	Number of respondents	Percentage
Strongly disagree	27	5.40
Disagree	107	21.40
Neutral	34	6.80
Agree	316	63.20
Strongly agree	16	3.20
Total	500	100.00

Source: Computed from the Primary Data

### Reduced vulnerability to economic shocks and crises

The study has made an attempt to examine whether SHGs have helped to reduce the vulnerability of Scheduled Caste women to economic shocks and crises. Table - 4 shows the results of a survey of SHG members on the impact of SHGs on their vulnerability to economic shocks and crises. The study found that a majority of SHG members (73.2 per cent) agreed and around 15 per cent of the respondents strongly agreed that SHGs have helped to reduce their vulnerability to economic shocks and crises. Only 2.6 per cent of SHG members strongly disagreed with this statement, and 1.0 per cent disagreed. The remaining 8.4 per cent of SHG members were neutral. The findings of this study suggest that SHGs can help to reduce the vulnerability of Scheduled Caste women to economic shocks and crises.

**Table - 4**  
**IMPACT OF SHGs ON REDUCED VULNERABILITY TO ECONOMIC SHOCKS AND CRISES**

Opinion of the respondents	Number of respondents	Percentage
Strongly disagree	13	2.60
Disagree	5	1.00
Neutral	42	8.40
Agree	366	73.20
Strongly agree	74	14.80
Total	500	100.00

Source: Computed from the Primary Data

#### **Increased economic decision-making power within household**

The study has made an attempt to examine whether participation in SHGs has resulted in increased economic decision making power within the household. The results of the study are presented in Table - 5. The results of the study showed that women who are members of SHGs are more likely to have increased economic decision-making power within their households. For example, close to 52 per cent of respondents who were members of SHGs agreed and around 38 per cent of the respondents are strongly agreed that they had more say in how household income was spent. On the other hand, very negligible percentage of the respondents are disagreed or strongly disagreed and neutral response is received from about 9 per cent of the respondents. The study found that women who are members of SHGs are more likely to have increased economic decision-making power within their households.

**Table - 5**  
**IMPACT OF SHGs ON INCREASED ECONOMIC DECISION-MAKING POWER WITHIN HOUSEHOLD**

Opinion of the respondents	Number of respondents	Percentage
Strongly disagree	4	0.80
Disagree	4	0.80
Neutral	46	9.20
Agree	258	51.60
Strongly agree	188	37.60
Total	500	100.00

Source: Computed from the Primary Data

#### **Knowledge of bank procedures**

The study has made an attempt to examine whether the participation in SHGs has resulted in creating knowledge about banking procedures. Opinions of the respondents are furnished in Table - 6. The table shows that 69.8 per cent of respondents agreed and about 28 per cent of the respondents strongly agreed that SHGs have had a positive impact on their knowledge of bank procedures. This is a significant finding, as it suggests that SHGs are playing a role in empowering women by increasing their financial literacy. On the contrary, very negligible percentage of the respondents are disagreed or strongly disagreed.

**Table – 6**  
**IMPACT OF SHGs ON KNOWING BANK PROCEDURES**

Opinion of the respondents	Number of respondents	Percentage
Strongly disagree	6	1.20
Disagree	4	0.80
Neutral	-	-
Agree	349	69.80
Strongly agree	141	28.20
Total	500	100.00

Source: Computed from the Primary Data

## CONCLUSION

The aim of the study is to examine economic empowerment of Scheduled Caste women through their participation in Self-help Groups. The study has examined whether participation in SHGs has resulted in the increased income and savings, improved access to credit and financial services, enhanced control over assets and resources, reduced vulnerability to economic shocks and crises, increased economic decision-making power within household and knowledge of bank procedures. The findings of this study suggest that SHGs are an effective way to empower Scheduled Caste women. SHGs are found to be helping Scheduled Caste women to increase their income and savings, improving their control over assets and resources, reducing vulnerability to economic shocks and crises, increasing economic decision making power within the household and improving their financial literacy. These are all important steps in empowering women and improving their lives.

The study provides valuable insights into the potential of SHGs to empower Scheduled Caste women in India. There are a number of challenges that need to be addressed in order to ensure that SHGs are effective in empowering Scheduled Caste women. First, it is important to ensure that SHGs are well-managed and that they have access to adequate resources. Second, it is important to provide SHGs with training and support so that they can effectively manage their finances and deliver services to their members. Third, it is important to ensure that SHGs are inclusive and that they reach out to the most marginalized women in society.

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