CHAPTER – III

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND SELF-HELP GROUPS

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Our country has a three fold increase in population over the last half a century but the economy has not been able to cope with this rate of growth, women constitute nearly half of the nation's population, they have been playing significant roles both on the social and economic fronts. Women as mothers and caretakers contribute to human resource development. They have collectively struggled against direct and indirect barriers to their self development, their social, political and economic participation. In recent times, empowerment of women emerged as one of the significant strategies in the development process and thinking in our socio-economic environment. Number of strategies and programmes has been taken by the government for social and economic emancipation of women. Among the programmes, empowerment through SHG strategy is a multifaceted process, which encompasses many aspects such as enhancing awareness increasing access to power resource (economic, social and political) but of which an equally important component is the mobilization and organization of women into groups. The SHGs form the basis for solidarity, strength and collective action for empowerment and also linked to the issues of social justice and equality in the society.

3.2 STATUS OF WOMEN

Mahatma Gandhi had brought out the nature, role and significance of women in the human societal set up in unequivocal terms like “Women is a companion of man gifted with equal mental capacities, she has the right to participate in the minutest details of the activities of man; and she has the same right of freedom and liberation of man”.

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3.2.1 Women in Vedic Period

During the Vedic Period, Women in India had held equal positions with men, inheriting and possessing properties and participating in cultural activities, and State functions. The principle of “one to one relationship was in vogue in marital arrangement” and childless widows were permitted to remarry. In the subsequent Upanishad period, the equality between two sexes continued. However, women had good amount of education and they were popular in sports also. There was a gradual decline in the status of women from this period. Female births were not welcome and polygamy slowly had crept in the society. Women had lost their freedom even to choose their husbands (Uduman Mohideen 2002)\(^1\). Arthasasthra had assigned only biological role for women in the society, that “Women are created for the sake of sons”.

3.2.2 Women in the Mediaeval Period

In the beginning, the real determination in their status with the invasion of Mughals. Altekar (1973) finds 500A.D. to 1800A.D. as the worst period for women. The society was characterized by seclusion of women; through lower caste women did enjoy a certain measure of freedom. Among the upper caste women “Sati” becomes a mark of prestige” (Rama Mehtra 1987)\(^2\).

3.2.3 Women in Islam period

Hindu society become more rigid women were forcibly converted to Islam and married. The position of widows was deplorable. Widows were looked down upon and were not allowed to remarry. They were forced to commit Sati. She was disfigured, unattractive kept in isolation. She was prevented from participating in social and religious rituals” (Sadhiya 1994)\(^3\).

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\(^1\) Uduman Mohideen (2002), “Indian women’s status retrospective and prospective views”, Empowerment of women and Ecological development book, Serials Publications, New Delhi, pp 58-70


3.2.4 Women in British Period

While the British rule had enacted awareness of common interest that saw two important movements (i) the social reform movement of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and (ii) Mahatma Gandhi National movement that helped to change laws on “Sati”, to prevent ill-treatment of widows, Polygamy, Child marriage, denial of rights including property and education, temple prostitution and system of Purdah and to encourage widow remarriage. Social evils like sati, problems of widowhood, infanticide, purdha, dowry system, child marriage, unequal’s marriage, polygamy, polyandry, devadasi system etc had inflected the society badly. Sati was prevalent among the high castes. Social evils which were mentioned above so far are connected to women but there were other social evils also. We shall find all these evils directly or indirectly related to women. So the conditions of women was miserable (Sadhiya 1994)\(^4\). The presence of social evils was such a great hindrance to freedom movement and society’s development that many social thinkers came to eradicate the social evils. This period of British rule that can be called as social reform Era (Parikh, Chandra Ghose 1918)\(^5\).

3.2.5 Women in Post-Independence Period

Indian Constitution had guaranteed “equality” among all sections to the society through suitable economic Policy and Social welfare programmes. Even after 50 years of Independence women of the nation constituting around 50 percent of the population have to frame the problem of poverty, social discrimination, violence oppression and Marginalization. The post-independence events did not bring about any dramatic change in the representation of women in political sphere. Women’s representation’s in the parliament in the last 50 years had remained in single digit percentage only.

\(^4\) Ibid, p.20

with its maximum of 7.92 percent in 1998 and the minimum of 3.50 percent in 1977. However, due to 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment, the female representation in the Tamilnadu State had worked out to 33.41 percent (Tamilnadu state election dept).

3.2.6 Women in Modern Period

Greater participation of women in social and political life is equally important for their integration in the development process. Because development is not merely economic but also participation in social and political life which carries its own status. The increasing awareness of the existence of significant relationship between the role and status of women and the ultimate economic well being of the family is reflected in the growing volume of literature on women studies. However, in view of the special nature of the most of the work done by women and the total contribution they make towards the family and the nation economy, employment of women increases day by day (Malathi 2002).

3.2.7 Women in Tamilnadu

The family in India especially in Tamilnadu is largely patrilineal and Patrilocal, i.e., the care of the family is constituted by males and the women are brought as brides into the family. The joint family system is found among forward castes, society for want of adequate resources to keep up kinship structures. In joint family system, wife is to spend more time with other women in the family than with her husband. The youngest brides are to shoulder heaviest household burden in the joint family system, the movement of married women is generally restricted, while her contact with natal home is often discouraged. These are indications of the loss of freedom for women. The devaluation of women commences at birth itself with the preference for male child to continue family succession as well as to perform the rites of

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6 Tamilnadu State Election Department, Chennai.

lighting the parents' funeral pyre. Besides, the males are looked upon as an economic support, while the females are considered as burdensome and economic liability. This is one of the reasons for higher female mortality rates (Danida 1998) and also female infanticide is not uncommon in state of Tamilnadu especially Salem, Dharmapuri and Namakkal Districts (District wise census statistics on sex ratio 1998). This reflects on the sex ratio. In Tamilnadu, there was a steady decline in the gross sex ratio from 979 in 1971 to 957 in 1991 (Census of India). The position of rural women is still worse is degraded and disrespected in the family. The women are less-credit-worthy as they do not have any command over economic resources. Due to the exiting social conditions, taboos and customs, low level of women’s literacy, physical weakness, early marriage and childbearing, timidity and male domination, there has been discrimination against women in the society. Many women, belonging to low and middle class families both in urban and rural areas, do not have hygienic environment. Degradation of environment had resulted in lack of clean water, scarcity of water, lack of sewerage facilities, lack of storm water drainage facilities and improper dwelling places.

3.3 MEANING OF EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment literally means, "Becoming powerful"; Empowerment is a process whereby women become able to organize themselves to increase their own self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choices and control resources, which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination.

Empowerment is an active a multidimensional process to enable women to realize their identity and powers in all spheres enabling women to acquire and posses "Power resource" in order to make decisions or resist the


decisions that are made by others which affect women. Further empowerment provides greater access to knowledge and resources, more autonomy in decision making, greater ability to plan their lives, more control over the circumstance, which influence their lives and freedom from custom, belief and practice (Ramanujam and Thenmozhi 2006)\textsuperscript{11}.

3.4 CONCEPT OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

The 'Empowerment' approach was first clearly articulated in 1985 by Development Alternatives with Women for a New era (DAWN). ‘Women Empowerment’ concept was introduced at the International women’s conference in 1985 at Nairobi. The Conference defined “Empowerment” as a redistribution of social power and control of resources in favour of women. In the true sense of the word, Empowerment would mean giving-up old established ways, habits and giving-up privileges. This term received prominence in early nineties in western countries. The concept of women's empowerment is the outcome of several important critiques and debates generated by the women's movement throughout the world, particularly by the third world feminists. Its source can be traced from the interactive between feminism and the concept of "Popular education" developed in Latin America in the 1970's the concept of women's empowerment has its roots throughout the world in women's movement.

In the Indian context the process of empowerment has passed through various stages. In 1960s and 1970s Policies and programmes were not aimed at empowering women. The first step in empowering women was organizing them at grass root level by establishing Mahila Mandals. It was framed on the basis of American house manager scheme without thinking how far it is Suitable to Indian women. Later the focus was made on improving the education and health condition of women. The traces of empowerment were found in strategies adopted to achieve women’s development and equality. Besides to bring women into the mainstream of the development process, policy environment was created in 1980s by adopting various policies like

education policy, nutrition policy and amendments in various acts related to women.

The process of gaining control over the resources, ideology and self, which determine power, can be called empowerment. When we apply this definition for empowerment of women, it is clear that women do not have power, since they do not have control over resources. Even if they have it is only to some extent over some resources. In the family male person is considered as breadwinner, physical and financial asset are in his name and control, naturally power is in his hands. Women are kept out of this domain. In this context women should have power by gaining control over the resources ideology and self, empowerment is not limited to power. Women empowerment is a larger and broader concept with vaster and different dimensions.

Empowerment is the result of the process which enables an individual to know about herself, what she wants, express it, try to get it and fulfill their needs by enhanced confidence, awareness, mobility, choices, control over resources and decisions making power. Central government in its welfare programmes shifted the concept of development to empowerment only in the Ninth plan (1997-2002) and observed the year the 2001 as “Women empowerment year” in general is related to the poor or those who are powerless.

3.5 DEFINITION OF EMPOWERMENT

The social work dictionary (Basker 1991)\textsuperscript{12} defines empowerment as "The process of helping a group or community to achieve political influence or relevant legal authority."

According to (zippy 1995)\textsuperscript{13}, empowerment as” a means for accomplishing community development tasks and can be conceptualized as involving two key elements giving community members the authority to


make decisions and choices and facilitating the development of the knowledge and resources necessary to exercise these choices”

(Dubhushi 1997)\textsuperscript{14} considered empowerment as exercising control over one's lives, firstly on resources of financial, physical and human and secondly on beliefs, values and attitudes.

### 3.6 NEED FOR EMPOWERMENT

In India, there is a strong performance for the male child, as sons are perceived to be future bread-earners and also the old age security for parents. A girl child faces discrimination from birth till death. Indian women are generally viewed as economic burdens and the contributions they make to their families are overlooked.

The vicious circle of poverty in India has a much greater impact on women. Women comprise nearly 70\% of the total population, living below the poverty line. Empowerment of women is the only remedy to this problem. But it is long and difficult process. It requires a change in the minds of the people. If a woman in economically empowered, it becomes much easier for her to become socially empowered.

As former UN secretary general kofi Annan has stated, "Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustained development and building good government, this is missing in India. The Tenth Plan (2002-07) continues with major strategy of "Empowering women" as an agent of social change and development for this purpose a sector specific there-fold strategy has been adopted (Nirmala 2008)\textsuperscript{15}.

\textsuperscript{14} Dubhushi, (2006), “Empowerment of rural women through SHGs”, Discovery publishing house, New Delhi, p 2.

Marshall (1993)\textsuperscript{16} suggests that if women are to become "empowered" they would be able to sign and cope with organization's culture.

**Women need empowered for the following**

I. To develop self esteem, confidence, realize their potential and enhance their collective bargaining power.

II. Awareness building about women's status, discrimination, rights and opportunities is a vital step towards gender equality.

III. Capacity building and skill development, especially the ability to plan, make decisions, organize, manage and carry out activities, to deal with people and institutions in the world around them.

IV. Participation and greater control and decision-making power in the affairs of home, community and in the society.

V. Action to bring about greater equality between men and women.

3.6.1 Need for Empowerment of women in Management

In recent years nation-states in many parts of the world have been attempting to improve the status of women in their society. An important element in national policies is the improvement of women's access to a wider range of jobs, including those at a managerial level. Though the government has launching many schemes for the development of women, they are so poorly represented in management level. There are some reasons for low participation in management level.

- Women having lack of leadership qualities, especially assertiveness
- Women dislike power or are afraid of it.
- Social attitude (ie. role of women as home makers, wife, mothers, caretaker like that)
- Women are insufficiently ruthless in the work place.

• The dominance of male values in organization culture.

• The need for many women to have extended career breaks precisely to bring up children and care for elderly relatives.

• Non-cooperation with family members (husband etc.,) men’s needs.

• Lack of effective social networks at senior and middle level management.

3.7 IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

“As long as women do not have the same right in law as men, as long as the birth of a girl does not receive the same welcome as that of a boy, so long we should know that India is suffering from partial paralysis. Suppression of women is inconsistent with principles of ahimsa” (non-violence) - Mahatma Gandhi

Women empowerment is an important tool for social development and this can be achieved when the society recognizes women as one among the social partners. Provided them equal rights, facilitated them with equal education, health and out of all these allow them to participate equally and effectively. Women and children together constitute about one-third of the total population (2001) of our country. The women as target group account for 48.3% of the total population, as per 2001 census. Hence, development of women, safeguarding their interest is to ensure that they are brought into the mainstream to take advantage to the general developmental activities. Even the various sectoral policies announced in recent past-health (2001), Nutrition (1993), Population (2000) Education (1992), Agriculture (2000) have stressed the need and focused on the comprehensive development of women (planning commission, 2002)17. The various efforts and actives for the development of women are based on the empowerment strategy that is increasing the capacity of the women.

Achieving equality in opportunity, decisions making power, gaining confidence, building productive capacities, challenging existing power relations, gaining control over resources are the essential components which an individual or group has to achieve through the process of empowerment.

3.8 SIGNIFICANCE OF EMPOWERMENT

The term "Empowerment" has gained significance and prominence recently among policy makers and researchers. In the field of women's studies and social work it is viewed with a holistic perspective and it can be classified as educational, economical, social, political and psychological empowerment. To quote Thomas and Pierson, empowerment referred to user participation in services and to the self help movement generally, in which groups took action on their own behalf, either in cooperation with or independently of the statutory services. Empowerment is concerned with how people may gain collective control over their lives. So as to achieve their interest the power of people who lack it.

3.9 INDICATORS OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

The Draft country paper-India for the fourth world conference on women held at Beijing in 1995 proposed the following qualitative and quantitative indicators for evaluating women's empowerment.

3.9.1 Qualitative Indicators

- Self-confidence understands what she wants, expresses it and tries to get it, feels proud of her self has positive self-image.

- Articulation

- Awareness about health, nutrition, legal right, political activities, government policies and programmes.

- Less burden of work and more leisure time,

- Changing role and responsibilities within the family.

- Decrease in violence within the family.

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• Changing attitudes towards tradition and customs like child marriage and dowry.

• Physical mobility—walk freely within the village, go to the city or town, to banks, post office, and go for shopping, cinema, exhibition and visit relatives.

• Become member of women's group or any other people's organization.

• self-identity—identifies herself positively

• Decision making power within the family regarding number of children.

• Education of children, marriage of children, budgeting of the family, income and purchase or sale of family property.

• Changed attitudes towards women's participation in politics and willingness to participate in the politics.

• Control over individual and family income.

• Access to resources like land, house, jewellery, house site, etc.

• Access to information, knowledge and skills.

3.9.2 Quantitative Indicators

• Increase in age at marriage.

• Reduction in fertility rate or number of children.

• Becoming beneficiaries of development programmes.

• Visible changes in physical status/nutritional status.

• Improvement in literacy level and

• Becoming member of a political party or local self-government.
3.10 PROCESS OF EMPOWERMENT

Both individual and collective process of empowerment is based on the following five principles.

- Self-reliance
- Self-awareness
- Collective mobilization and organizations
- Capacity building
- External exposure and interaction

3.10.1 Empowerment is a long process. It has to pass by different stages

a. In the first stage, women should be trained to look into the situation from a different perspective and recognize the power relations that perpetuate their oppression. At this stage, the women share their feelings and experiences with each other and build a common vision and mission.

b. In the second stage, the women tried to change the situation by bringing about a change in the gender and social relations.

c. In the third stage, the process of empowerment makes them more mature to realize the importance of collective active.

3.11 EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIA

Even after sixty-two years of Indian independence, women are still one of the most powerless and marginalized sections of Indian society. The 2001 Census shows that the sex ratio for India is 933, which is lowest in the world. Percentage of female literacy is 54.16 against male literacy of 75.85 percent. In India, women’s representation in Parliament and in the State Assemblies has never beyond 8 and 10 percent respectively. Most of the working women remain outside the organized sector. A mere 2.3 percent women are administrators and managers, 20.5 percent professional and the
technical workers all of whom collectively earn 25 percent of the shared income (Chinnammai, 2002)\(^\text{18}\).

Indian constitution in its fundamental rights has provisions for equality, social justice and protection of women. These goals are yet to be realized. Still women continue to be discriminated, exploited and exposed to inequalities of various levels. So the concept of empowerment as a goal of development projects and programmes has been gaining wider acceptance. Women in India are still a neglected lot, despite the assurance given in the constitution and commitment towards women empowerment. They are poorest of the poor receiving little education, low medical attention, lower value for their work etc. They are still subjected to frequent pregnancies resulting in pregnancy wastage and increasing risk of maternal mortality. In India it was assumed that trickle down effect of rapid economic growth will improve the quality of life of the downtrodden and weaker sections of the population. It was realized that unless exclusive women development programmes are initiated, women’s development would not be possible. The Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women.

3.11.1 All the five year plans had given importance to the development of women

The first five year plan (1951-56)

It focused on the need to provide adequate services for women’s welfare. It planned for development of maternal and child health and family planning services.

The second five year plan (1960-66)

The plan stated that women should be protected against injurious work and it also suggested speedy implementation of the principle of equal pay for equal work.

The third five year plan (1980-66)
   The main thrust was on the expansion of girl's education.

The fourth five year plan (1969-74)
   It measures to improve material and child health services, supplementary feeding for children nursing and expectant mother were also introduced.

The fifth five year plan (1974-79)
   Showed a shift from welfare to development. The new approach aimed at an integration of welfare with developmental services.

The sixth five year plan (1980-85)
   Introduced a separate chapter on women. This plan adopted a multi-disciplinary approach with a three pronged thrust on health, education and employment. It stressed on economic independence.

The seventh five year plan (1986-90)
   The main thrust of plan was in making women realize their role in the process of development. It focused on the concepts of equality and empowerment of women which was expressed by the international decade for women.

The eighth five year plan (1972-97)
   Which shifted the focus from development to empowerment. In 1990 the National Commission for women Act was enacted.

The ninth five year plan (1997-2002)
   The ninth plan document has empowerment of women as one of the primary objectives. It envisages the empowering of women as the agents of social change and development.
The Tenth plan (2002-07)

It continues with major strategy of “empowering women” as an agent of social change and development.

The Twelve salient strategies spelt out focused on empowering women by making women economically independent and self-reliant. It was being hoped that the strategies would be realized through the National policy for empowerment of women. Remarkably self Help Groups were considered to be one of the strategies to mark the beginning of major process of empowering women.

Committee on the empowerment of women was constituted on April 1997 to improve the status of women. It consisted of 30 members, 20 members of Lok Sabha, 10 members of Rajya Sabha of Indian parliament. The committee presented its first report on “Developmental schemes for rural women” to Lok Sabha on 21 April 1999. Planning commission (1999-2000) had given specific emphasis on empowerment of women, besides the continuation of the important initiative programmes like Rural Women’s Development and Empowerment Project (RWDEP) was introduced in the status of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana, Karnataka and Gujarat for a period of five years. The overall objective of the project is to enable empowerment of women by establishing Self Help Groups which will improve the quality of their lives through greater access to and control over resources.

In order to alter the scenario the year 2001 has been declared as the year of women empowerment and in order to help women focused on issues of importance, each month had a theme as follows:-
3.11.2 Important events of Women Empowerment during the year, 2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Theme</th>
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<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>Human rights for women</td>
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<td>February</td>
<td>Economic empowerment of women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>Social empowerment of women</td>
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<td>April</td>
<td>Women in difficult circumstances</td>
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<td>May</td>
<td>Women and technology</td>
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<td>June</td>
<td>Women and governance</td>
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<td>Women and media</td>
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<td>November</td>
<td>Entrepreneurship in women</td>
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<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>Vision for the future</td>
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3.12 EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN TAMILNADU

Tamil Nadu is one of the States, which have played a leading role in the empowerment and development of women. Empowerment of women has become a fashionable term nowadays. But long before the term became vogue, and feminine movement came into existence, Periyar E.V.Ramasami, a great social revolutionary of the 20th century worked for the improvement of the status of women and their rights. He gave equal priority for raising the status of women, abolition of untouchability and discrimination based on caste. He regretted that nearly 50 percent of the manpower of the country was wasted because of the slavery of women. He advocated self-respect marriage
system not only to boycott Brahmin priests and Brahministic rituals, but also to give a new idea of freedom and equality to wedding couples. He encouraged widow remarriage. Women’s employment itself would directly lead to birth control and this could become an excellent method of family planning. Thus Periyar suggested many things for the empowerment of women. The Dravidan parties which have been in power in Tamil Nadu since 1967 have implemented a number of schemes/programmes for the welfare and empowerment of women (Loganathan et.al 2002)\(^\text{19}\).

### 3.13 EMERGENCE OF SELF HELP GROUPS

All over the world there is a realization that the best way to tackle poverty and enable that community to improve its quality of life is through social mobilization of poor, especially women into Self Help Groups. Since independence a number of innovative schemes have been launched for the upliftment of women in our country. Indian government has taken lot of initiatives to strengthen the institutional rural credit system and development programmes. Shifting the concepts of “Development to empowerment” the Indian Government adopted the approach of Self Help Group (SHGs). Self Help Groups are necessary to overcome exploitation, create confidence for the economic self-reliance of poor, particularly among women who are mostly invisible in the social structure (Suguna 2006)\(^\text{20}\).

To uplift the rural poor women focusing on the following aspects.

- Direct involvement of women in programming and management,
- Effective collaboration with community organization.
- Organizing and strengthening of women’s Self Help Groups (SHGs)
- Sensitization and advocacy of gender just society.

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\(^{20}\) Opcit, Suguna (2006), New Delhi, p.13.
• Organizing women in different groups to undertake certain
  productive activities to earn their livelihood and to develop rural community.
• Differentiating between consumers’ credit and production credit.
• Providing easy access to credit and facilitating group/organization for effective control.
• Ensuring repayment and controlling through group dynamics;
• Setting viable norms for interest rates, repayment schedules, gestation period, extension, writing off bad debts and
• Assisting group members in getting access to the formal credit institution.

3.14 WHY SHGs

Underdeveloped countries exhibit both economic and human poverty of which the latter is more humiliating and painful than the former. The incidence of human poverty is not equally shared by both sexes in these countries. It falls heavily on women. Indian conditions provide ample evidence of how women are under the subjugation of human poverty. Human poverty among women includes illiteracy, malnutrition, high death rate, fragile health status, deprivation of basic life ingredients and above all. In India, it may be attributed to the lack of economic independence. Since employment, wage or paid employment ensures improvement in quality of life of the employees, it is always looked as a panacea of inequality. In rural areas, the situation of inequality between sexes is worse. Any programme of action intended to increase the living standard of women in India particularly rural women. Undoubtedly necessary vehicle for the purpose is supplied by institution of Women SHGs which help improving the employment supportive policies of the government for women. In fact, WSHGs act as the agents of empowering the women. Though Empowerment is normally
understood as a quick process of social transformation whereby the people as a whole stand to gain from such rearrangement in the present context, it refers to strengthening the status of marginalized rural women who have no economic independence and security. Thus WSHGs are basically meant to empower rural women (Bimal Mohanty 2006)\(^1\).

### 3.15 NEEDS FOR SHGS

Self Help Groups are necessary to overcome exploitation, create confidence for the economic Self-reliance of rural poor, particularly among women who are mostly invisible in the social structure. These groups enable them to come together for a common objective and gain strength from each other to deal with exploitation which they are facing in several forms. A group becomes the basis for action and change. It also helps building of relationship for mutual trust between the promoting organization and the rural poor to constant contact and genuine efforts (Om Raj Singh 2005)\(^2\).

### 3.16 EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN THROUGH SELF HELP GROUPS

Movement of Women Development through Self Help Groups has been introduced in difficult parts of the Country and abroad to promote socio-economic status of the women in particular and to bring out all round development in general. During early 1980s an experimental attempt was made in our neighboring Country of Bangladesh by Dr.Mohammad Yunis. He wanted to encourage landless and marginalized women and women known as beggar to undertake petty trade with little loan given from his own pocket at the initial stage. This effort was turned into an effort of grand success with its innovative approach to motivate the poor and disadvantaged women to inculcate banking habits through small savings and credit activities, which at present has attained a global campaign as “Bangladesh

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\(^2\) Opcit, Om Raj Singh, New Delhi, 2005, pp 71-77
Gramin Bank”. The empowerment of women through Self Help Groups (SHGs) would lead to benefits not only to the individual women and women groups but also for the families and community as a whole through collective action for development. These groups have through collective action for development. These groups have a common perception of need and impulse towards collective action. Empowering women not just for meeting their economic needs but also get more holistic social development.

3.17 ORIGIN OF SELF HELP GROUP

The origin of SHG is from the brain child of GRAMIN Bank of Bangladesh, which was found by the economist, Prof. Mohammed Yunus of Chittagong University in the year 1975. This was exclusively established for the poor. To encourage landless and marginalized women known as beggar to undertake pity trade with little loan given from his own pocket at the initial stage. The rural poor and disadvantaged women to inculcate banking habits through small savings and credit activities, which at present has attained a global campaigns “Bangladesh Grameen Bank” delivery system in many parts of the world. In has been documented that nearly 53 developing countries including India, have taken up this on a large scale. In 1997, world Micro Credit summit at Washington converged the developed and the developing countries to tackle the serious problem of poverty by using micro credit as a tool to empower the poorest sections. We are aware that government of Indian has already been implementing micro-finance programme by creating an autonomous body called “Rashtriya Mahila Kosh” under the department of women and child Development. The institution has been formed to promote economic status of women through Self Help Groups.

3.18 MEANING OF SELF HELP GROUP

Self Help Group is a small economically homogeneous and affinity group of rural poor which is voluntarily ready to contribute to a common fund to be lent to its members as per group decision, which works for group’s
solidarity, self-group, awareness, social and economic empowerment in the way of democratic functioning.

Self-Help Groups are Self-managed groups of poor men and women primarily came into existence to mobilize financial resources through own savings and revolve the same to meet the credit needs of these members. Each SHG has a unique system of organizing and managing its own finances and operates as an independent institution.

Self-help group is a viable organized set up to disburse micro credit to the rural women for the purpose of making them enterprising women and encouraging them to enter into entrepreneurial activities.

A SHG is an informal association of 10-20 women, who have voluntarily come together for the business of saving and credit and to enhance the member's financial security as primary focus and other common interests of members such as area development, awareness, motivation and leadership.

3.19 CONCEPT OF SHGs

"All for all" is the principle behind the concept of Self Help Groups. It is mainly concerned with the poor and it is for the people, by the people and of the people. SHGs, a mini voluntary agency for self-help at the micro level has been a focus on the weaker sections particularly women for their social defense. SHGs had got great potential in creating awareness on day-to-day affairs, promoting in savings habit, developing self and community assets, increasing the income level, increasing the social power etc. The concept of SHGs generates confidence, self-scrutiny and self-reliance. The Tamilnadu Women Development project had been taken up for implementation under the name of "Mahalir Thittam" covered about 10 lakhs poor women for the state in the year 1997-98. This scheme is intended to promoted economic development and social empowerment of the poorest women through
network of self-help group formed with active support of NGOs 
(Suguna 2006)\(^{23}\).

SHG is a mechanism to extend mutual help and support through sharing ideas, experiences, information, other services and resources. The groups may be viewed as a process or an institution for socio economic transformation leading to empowerment of rural poor.

- SHG is a voluntary association of the women, by the women and for the women.
- Homogeneous in nature in terms of occupation, caste, class and marital status.
- Based on the principle of equity, equality and democracy.
- A group for bringing out women development in a holistic manner.
- Having common desire to work as an action group.
- A group for mobilizing other women to introduce small savings and credit activities for self-reliance and economic emancipation.

3.20 OBJECTIVES OF SHGs
- To encourage the rural women to form groups for having a common platform for sharing different views on their common concerned.
- To establish linkages between SHGs of women and banks.
- To generate awareness about various affairs relating to their socio-economic health, cultural, political and legal matters.
- To inculcate savings and credit habits among the members of the group for creating a common fund through weakly small savings to meet the future needs.
- To promote and establish networking among the existing SHGs.

• To train them for maintaining various records properly viz.,

• To impart technical and scientific knowledge to the members for
  capacity building as well as to undertake various income generating
  activities in group or individually.

• To encourage their participation in various development programmes
  so as to enhance the process of social development in a greater way.

• To encourage rural poor women for promoting their economic status
  by utilizing the skills and knowledge acquired through training.

3.21 CHARACTERISTICS OF SHGs

• Every group member should have a clear conception about the vision
  and mission of their group.

• They should have a good faith among themselves with similar
  ideology and common interest.

• Every group has an identity by its name and place of operation.

• Leadership in each group is confined for a period of three years and
  the members should make change of leadership as the term is over.

• There should have a better understanding and inter-member
  cohesiveness among group members.

• Every member should meet each other at least once in a week at a
  common place to discuss over their common concerns so as to
  ventilate their narrow feelings.

• One-family, one-member norm is followed during registration of the
  members for a group.

• Membership will be entitled for having credit facility after practicing
  regular weekly savings for a period of more than six months.

• Only group members are entitled for savings and credit from group.
• Decision taken on any issue at group meetings will be treated as final and members in the group will have to follow the decision.

• Registration of new members or cancellation should be made within one-year from the date of formation of group.

3.22 SELF-HELP GROUPS IN GLOBAL CONTEXT

The biggest challenge to any civilized society is the economic deprivation of its bucolic part. The most potent tool against human deprivation is building human capital among the deprived, through sustainable development initiative which is taken by the deprived them. "Self realization and Self initiative are the two most powerful weapons to wash poverty out from the world map" this dynamic quotation of world’s greatest economist "Chanakya" is been translated to one word that is SHG (Sudhansu Sekar Mishra 2006)\(^{24}\). SHG has been functional in countries like Bangladesh, Malaysia, Korea, Philippines and Indonesia for a long time. (In fact, in Bangladesh the SHG approach has stabilized into a National programme and has shown remarkable results in poverty alleviation)

The emergence of self-help groups can be seen as a response to industrialization, the breakdown of the kinship system, and the decline of the community although alternative views see it as a reflection of an ineffective, inefficient and dehumanizing formal system of care. Currently, the increasing interest in providing services that are family-centered is also considered a factor contributing to the increased number of self-help groups (Rutherford Stuar 1999)\(^{25}\). Despite the variety of explanations for the self-help phenomenon, the consensus is that there is a need for a new model to supplement and complement professional services, and that self-help groups are growing at an unprecedented speed worldwide. For example, about two

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percent of Canadians belonged to self-help groups in 1987 (Gottlieb and Peters, 1991)\textsuperscript{26}, approximately 10 percent of Israel's population, was estimated to have some type of involvement in a self-help group and cancer self-help groups were found to be prevalent in major cities in China. In the United States, self-help group participation amounted to 10 million in 1996 (Kessler et al., 1997)\textsuperscript{27} and it was recently noted that more Americans try to change their health behaviors through self-help than through all other forms of professional programs combined. The proliferation of self-help groups in various countries can be seen as an initial indication of self-help group effectiveness, because groups will cease to exist without value. The self-help movement is becoming a global phenomenon. In some countries, self-help groups already exist for every medical condition listed by the World Health Organization and they are serving people who encounter almost every physical, behavioral and emotional problem. In spite of the rapid growth of self-help groups in India, the full potential of utilizing self-help groups remains untapped. One of the reasons may be attributed to the lack of systematic research and solid methodological foundations. Little was known about how helpful self-help groups are to members, and what kind of social impact they have brought about. The research component of the self-help phenomenon has clearly been left behind by the self-help movement itself. Theoretically and empirically, the effectiveness of self-help groups has been widely documented in global context.

3.23 SELF-HELP GROUPS IN INDIA

In our country the pioneer in this field is Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA). Without the Grameen model, SEWA was started in 1972. Though started as a Trade union for women in the unorganized sector, today SEWA boasts of running the first Women's Bank in the country. By the
year 2000 SEWA has a membership of 209250. It has also networked many co-operatives and emerged as the largest federation of co-operatives in the country.

SHG concept was introduced in India, during the year 1987 in Karnataka state. A Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) called MYRADA formed a group for poorest people called Taliblock Groups. With the inspiration of the Tamilnadu Scheme (Ma Thi), the Kerala State Government launched this programme in its state which is called “Kudambashree” with the help of the NGOs of their state. In Andra Pradesh, the state government directly forms SHG. Even though they started the concept later Tamilnadu got top position in terms of formation of SHG and credit linkages. (Bhavani 2008)28

In Southern India organizations like PRADAN, MYRADA, ASSEEFA, MALAR etc. have entered into this rural credit system. MALAR has emerged as a new self-reliant model for our nation. An offshoot of the Total Literacy Campaign in Kanyakumari District, MALAR has emerged as an organisation of poor women who share the interest income to sustain a full time structure, office and training schedule. This has kindled a new hope. Already 10 districts in Tamilnadu have undergone training at MALAR and started similar organisations for micro-credit.

Revamping of the rural credit system has already started. The banks Regional Rural Banks, Co-operatives and SHGs linked with Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have a role to play. There is need for closer study to support the system. So that the country can eradicate poverty at least in the beginning of the next millennium. NABARD introduced a Pilot Programme for starting and lending to SHGs in 1992 based on the experience of BGB and MYRADA. Now seeing the success in repayment many banks

are eager to lend to SHGs and because of the pressure from Government. NABARD has started giving targets to Banks.

Rashtriya Mahila Kosh - an organisation promoted by Govt. of India also gives direct loans to NGO's for on lending with incentives for proper repayment. All Banks including co-operative Banks and Private Banks lend to SHGs based on their savings at the ratio of 1:1 initially and this can go upto 1:4. Suddenly World Bank and IMF have found a way to reach the poor through NGOs and they see this opportunity to reduce poverty and also to prevent the poor from agitation because of the ill effects of their Economic policies.

The Government of India, which is under IMF and WB guidance, has launched schemes scrapping Integrated Rural Development Programme, Scheme for Urban Micro enterprises, Prime Ministers, Urban Poverty alleviation programme and TRYSEM. The Schemes are known as (1). Swarnajeanthi Gram Swarozhar Yojana – SGSY. (2). Swarnajeanthi Sahahari SwaRozhar Yojana – SJSRY. The former is for Gram Panchayats and the latter for Town Panchayats, Municipalities and corporations. According to this scheme, the Panchayats will select the good group with assistance from BDO, Bank and NGOs and provide Rs.10000/- as revolving fund - free of Interest and then banks will provide loan to the group - seeing the performance. There is an individual subsidy of 30% for those who do individual enterprises and 50% subsidy for Group enterprises. After the introduction of this scheme NGOs and Panchayat are forming groups or trying to get control of the Groups and funds. The scheme has a trap. If the repayment under this scheme is less than 70% in a Panchayat, nobody will get loan in this panchayat.
3.23.1 Programme route of SHGs in India

There is a very strong role for civil society organizations in this process. The state cannot, and could not, empower women. What the state can do is to create enabling conditions which legitimize a change in women’s position (Srilatha, 1997)\(^{29}\). In promoting SHG movement both Governmental and non-governmental agencies are involved. SHG movement had been designed to benefit women, especially in rural belt, towards providing them social status and identify. Hence, Central Governmental had invited the state Governments to involve in the SHG movement. In India, Tamilnadu and Andhra Pradesh had been successful in SHG movement. Therefore the Central Government had asked the State government of Orissa, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh to provide the same momentum for their development. The following model was followed in all over India.

Flow Diagram of SHGs in India

Funding Schemes of India

- State Government
- Mahalir Thittam
- Credit programme

- Central Government
- SGSY
- DRDA
- District Project Office
- NGO

Self-Help Groups

- Leaders
  - Animator
  - SHG Members
  - Representative-I & II

3.24 SELF-HELP GROUPS IN TAMILNADU

Andhra Pradesh and Tamilnadu are the pioneer state in the country in establishing such Self help groups. But Tamilnadu is the only state that has a systematic policy to cover every habitation and family that is poor. The beginning of the movement being implemented by Tamilnadu Corporation for development of women and its 450 NGOs partners go back to 1989 when the International Funding Agency for Agricultural Development (IFAD) assisted the projects (Bhavani 2008)\(^\text{30}\).

The SHGs of women have been recognized as an effective strategy for the empowerment of rural as well as urban women. The SHG concept in Tamilnadu began in the early 1990s. With the initiation of both Governmental and Non-Governmental Organizations, SHG have been formed and grown in the entire rural areas of Tamilnadu. The TNCDW, a governmental organization has been instrumental in women development. TNCDW has been implementing a number of projects and schemes including “Mahalir Thittam” some of which have yielded spectacular results with the partnerships of NGOs, Banks, Government Agencies and Departments. “Mahalir Thittam” is a process oriented project, which lays emphasis on the qualitative and socio-economic aspects of women development rather than mere targets. The TNCDW has made sustained impacts on the lives of thousands of poor and disadvantaged.

In 1991, Tamilnadu Elected Miss Jayalalitha a lady to the office of the Chief Minister who had “Empowerment of women” at the top of her political agenda. The Programme was extended to Salem and South Arcot districts in 1992 and to Madurai and Ramanathapuram districts in 1993 through her initiative. With that, Tamilnadu has been the only state in India to launch a state-wide programme fully funded by the state government without any assistance from the Government of India or Funding Agencies.

The following table shows the district wise number of Self Help Groups in overall Tamil nadu as on 31.08.2008.

### 3.24.1 GROUP FORMATION AS ON 31.08.2008 IN TAMIL NADU

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S. No.</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>SHGs</th>
<th>Rural members</th>
<th>Savings in lakhs</th>
<th>SHGs</th>
<th>Urban members</th>
<th>Savings In lakhs</th>
<th>SHGs</th>
<th>Total members</th>
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**Source:** DRDA, Mahalir Thittaiin, Dharmapuri District.
3.25 SHG ACTIVITIES IN DHARMAPURI DISTRICT

There are 5 Taluks and 8 Community development blocks in the Dharmapuri district. The SHGs were formed in this district in the year 1989 with the assistance of International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). Later the scheme was extended to the erstwhile Salem and South Arcot districts in the year 1991-1992 and further extended to Madurai and Ramanathapuram in the year 1992-93. Following the success of the IFAD project, Mahalir Thittam project was launched with State Government funding from 1997-1998 and was progressively introduced in all districts of the State. Today the SHG movement is a very vibrant movement spread across all districts of the State with nearly 59, 25,000 women as members. As on 31.8.2008, there are 3, 70,412 SHGs with a total savings of Rs 1,825.14 Crores in the state. As on 31.08.08 there are 5,957 groups found 95,312 women as members with a total of 6,091.23 lakhs in this district. The SHG women members were involves in economic activities such as textiles, Herbal Products, Utility items and household chemicals, food products, Handicrafts and other items like Bricks, Candle, Nursery, Quarry Products, Sanitary Napkin, Vegetable Cultivation, Vermi compost and Palm leaf products.

3.25.1 The following table shows the year-wise number of SHGs/members in the district of Dharmapuri before and after bifurcation as on August, 2008

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<tr>
<th>Sl.No.</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Bifurcation</th>
<th>No. of Groups</th>
<th>No. of Members in SHGs</th>
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<td>2003-04</td>
<td>before</td>
<td>5952</td>
<td>110352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05.</td>
<td>2004-05</td>
<td>after</td>
<td>3642</td>
<td>68081</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06.</td>
<td>2005-06</td>
<td>after</td>
<td>5073</td>
<td>91944</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07.</td>
<td>2006-07</td>
<td>after</td>
<td>5485</td>
<td>93245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>08.</td>
<td>2007-08</td>
<td>after</td>
<td>5957</td>
<td>95799</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>40970</strong></td>
<td><strong>741854</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: DRDA, Mahalir Thittam, Dharmapuri District
3.25.2 The following table shows NABARD Linkage MaThi and non-MaThi groups for the period of five years in the district of Dharmapuri as on 31.08.2007.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl.No.</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of Groups</th>
<th>Amount (Rs. in lakhs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01.</td>
<td>2003-04</td>
<td>2900</td>
<td>2508.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02.</td>
<td>2004-05</td>
<td>4858</td>
<td>5192.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03.</td>
<td>2005-06</td>
<td>5016</td>
<td>6111.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04.</td>
<td>2006-07</td>
<td>6495</td>
<td>10030.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05.</td>
<td>2007-08</td>
<td>1190</td>
<td>2450.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>20459</td>
<td>26294.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: DRDA, Mahalir Thittam, Dharmapuri District

3.26 GOVERNMENT POLICIES FOR SHGS

Having felt the urgency of SHGs in the process of uplifting the economic and social status of women, the Government of India has been formulating policies for them. State governments have also followed such policy of the central government. The Government of India is committed to the welfare of women through empowering them which is acknowledged from; "to adopt an integrated approach towards empowering women through effective convergence of existing services, financial and human resources, and infrastructure in both women specific and women related sectors". With a view to fulfilling such commitment the Government of India has been implementing policies of which some are directly and others are indirectly relevant for WSHGs.

3.27 ROLE OF SELF-HELP GROUPS ON WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) are usually informal groups whose members have a common perception of need and importance towards collective action. These groups promote savings among members and use the pooled resources to meet the emergent needs of their members, including the
consumption needs. It is expected that, within the group, there should be true
democratic culture in which all the members must participate actively in the
decision making process by taking part in the debate rather he should say
discussion. Though the cohesiveness among the members would be increase
due to homogeneity of the of the groups in terms of education, occupation,
income distribution, sex composition, but in the long term, stability of SHGs
depends on their members’ loyalty to it and the adequacy of SHGs to meet
the growing needs of the tenure, mutual trust and co-operative philosophy
would be the driving force for SHGs.

The basic objective of Self-Help Groups is to develop saving
capability among the poorest sections of the society, which in turn reduce
dependence on financial institutions and develop self-reliance. Earlier, every
poverty alleviation programme initiated by the Government of India had
failed in capacity building of the rural masses. Therefore, they became more
and more dependent on financial support. At this moment, Government must
realize that it would provide basic minimum facilities to the people
particularly marginalized sections with primary education to all women, men
and children, primary health, rural road, safe drinking water, sanitation and
strong public distribution system. They only, SHGs could go all out for all
round economic development (Sabyasachi Das 2005)31. They can play
pivotal role in:-

- Creating economic self-reliance of rural poor by meeting consumption
  and production credit needs as and when they arise. This will prevent
  exploitation of the poorer sections from non-institutional credit
  sources.

- Development of group dynamics, building leadership quality to realize
  their potentiality and self-belief.

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• Assisting the members to complete the formalities and documentation required to obtain credit from bank.

• Helping banks in recovery of credit by motivating members for prompt repayment of wars.

• Procurement of high cost inputs that could not be bought individually

• Training of members in the use of extension services and Government support.

• Building common infrastructure for the benefit of its members.

### 3.28 ORGANIZATION AND FUNCTION OF SHGS

The Self-Help Group generally has members not exceeding 20 and each group selects among its members one leader called animator. The animator conducts two to four meetings every month in the evening hours. The group members save a regular amount of Rs. 25 to Rs.100 every month. The group rotates the money to the needy members for various purposes at a specified interest rate. As the repayment is cent percent and the recycling is very fast the savings amount increases faster owing to the accumulation of income from interest. Saving habit helps the members to escape from the clutches of moneylenders. Saving habit paves the way for the empowerment of women and builds confidence in them that they can stand on their own feet. After the group stabilizes over a period of six months or more in the management of its own funds, it conducts regular meetings, maintain savings and give loans to members on interest.

The SHGs are being linked with the banks for the external credit under the projects of rural development. The joint appraisal team consisting of Bank managers, Rural Development-Officers, NGOs, Project Implementation Units visit the groups and select the beneficiaries proposed by the women groups and for providing financial assistance to the respective entrepreneurial activities. Banks provide financial assistance for various
entrepreneurial activities such as setting up of petty shops, vegetable shops, tailoring units, handicrafts and farming etc.

The borrowers repay the banks loan properly. The remit the loan dues to the animator at group meetings and animator repays the same to the bank. The SHGs repay more than 90 percent loans of the banks in time in contrast to less than 35 percent of repayment under IRDP. Besides focusing on entrepreneurial development and empowering women, SHGs concentrate on all round development of the beneficiaries and their village as a whole.

The group undertakes the responsibility of delivering non credit services such as literacy, health and environmental issues. The concept of SHG moulds women as responsible citizens of the country achieving social and economic status (Rajan Kumar Sahoo 2006)\textsuperscript{32}.

The animators will be from the local village and must necessarily be a resident of the village. The animator should preferably be literate and must possess certain leadership qualities. She must be in a position to take on the role of a trainer for the group members in certain aspects of their daily life and group functioning, based on the training that would be given to her. Two Representatives are nominated by the SHG from amongst members, rotated on a yearly basis, to ensure carrying out group tasks. The animator's position must be rotated amongst the representatives once every two years. She will facilitate a smooth switchover of responsibilities. She will also assist the representatives to learn the role of the animator to facilitate handover of responsibilities as and when required.

3.28.1 Books and registered to be maintained by SHGs

The following books and registers have to be maintained in every group:

1. Attendance register
2. Minutes book
3. Savings ledger
4. Loan ledger
5. General ledger
6. Cash book
7. Individual pass book
8. Receipt book
9. Payment vouchers

3.29 IMPACT OF SHGs ON WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN VARIOUS ASPECTS

The emerging changes in the values and attitudes of the members of the SHGs are a clear manifestation of socio-economic empowerment intervention yielding relatively quicker results. The socio-economic programme reinforces each other and promotes all round development of the children, women in the households and the society at large. SHG have a greater vision of empowerment of rural women for over all human development. This movement developed thrift as a habit among the rural poor women and paved the way for decision-making power for women in the family (Karunakar 2008)\textsuperscript{33}.

3.29.1 EDUCATIONAL ASPECTS

Education is the key which opens the door to life, develops humanity and promotes national development. Education can be an effective tool for women’s empowerment. It enables women to acquire new knowledge and technology required for improving and developing their tasks in all fields. Hence, no amount of effort will solve the problem, unless and until women themselves are initiated into a thinking- reflecting-questioning-acting process. This cannot be achieved until women can be hauled out of their acceptance of the anachronism of tradition to demand a better deal from family and society. Only and only education has the power. Therefore, at least one Functional Literacy Centre should be opened in each gram panchayat area with a view to make all women functionally literate.

3.29.1.1 Literacy of SHGs

Literacy has been defined as the ability to acquire the three ie. Reading, writing and arithmetic (Frederik 1968).34 Literacy is also considered as the threshold to education and development. The people, who pursue certain traditional trades like carpenters, blacksmiths, weavers etc., are not literate. They learned their trade by following their parents or guardian’s occupation. It makes it clear that literacy is one of the contributing factors for socio-economic development. The literacy has gained importance only recently with the introduction of industrialization, technological advancement, migration, knowledge revolution, higher standard of living etc. Though one’s own prosperity is not associated with literacy, one’s empowerment depends on the level of literacy. SHG women have trained up for self management like writing accounts, writing minutes of the meeting, going to bank for transactions and entries into pass books. Women Literacy is a special programme conceived and implemented in Dharmapuri District to impart and improve literacy skills among the members of Self Help Groups. It is designed in such a way that literacy is made part of group activity as

thrift and savings. Rural women today realized that literacy of Self Help Groups is an important tool of communication, learning and information and precondition of economic development.

3.29.2 ECONOMIC ASPECTS

Available studies show that most of the women have started self-employment ventures (income generating activities) after joining the SHG (Surekha and Padmaja 1998) by taking advantage of the pooled resources in the group. In this context, one of the major constraints faced by women while opting for any economic activity is lack of information and skills of how to select the activity (Lalitha 1998). It underlines a need for training of women in identification of opportunity for viable economic activities and making available resources for the same. At the same time, when the purpose of loan is focused much in the SHGs, it may shift away from the ‘poor’ to the ‘better off’ members in the group.

Punithavathy Pandian and Eswaran (2002) argued that the economic empowerment of poor is the only way for poverty eradication. Because increased access to financial resources enables poor women to increase their employment and income in the petty business that has local demand and also based on local resources. Once economic empowerment is achieved in terms of easy access to credit facilities, better bargaining power has an influence on overall social empowerment (Lalitha and Nagarajan 2002). Hence, collective economic strength in the group leads to enhanced access to new information, skills, knowledge about resources and collective action. It also results in improving their ability to participate and take decisions both at home and in community.


3.29.3 SOCIAL ASPECTS

A study by Gopalakrishnan (1998)³⁹ has shown a positive change towards child care, environment, sanitation, drinking water, public speaking and child education. Most of the women showed interest in sending their girl children to school and were also involved in prohibiting arrack sales in their area. It indicates involvement of women as a group in the overall development of the local community and also in the empowerment process, as a result of enhanced awareness among he women in the group. Thus, the SHG strategy provides women with a chance for educative programme, awareness creation on issues such as drinking water and sanitation, family planning and literacy (Dodkey 1999)⁴⁰. Moreover, the group helps women to interact among themselves and enhance their participation in development. As women are empowered with information and resources, it enabled them to initiate social action against dowry system, alcoholism, illiteracy and other social issues (Jay Anand 2000)⁴¹. The collective strength of women under the SHG has increased their ability to take up and work for social empowerment. Further, they are enabled to access more information on development and welfare programmes implemented for women development. Thus, the SHGs work as forum in which women can undertake collective action for their progress and also to fight against various social evils.

Creating awareness of present social position is an important role. Because majority of the group members were illiterate, the NGO would arrange training to improve the awareness level of the SHG members. At the time of training visuals, charts, picture stories, awareness songs (especially

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on social themes like child marriage, dowry system, female infanticide and general hygiene) and games were used (Tamilselvi 2004) 42.

3.29.4 POLITICAL ASPECTS

Political empowerment of women has been continuously neglected ever since independence, even though the country is wedded to the democratic system and the women constituted nearly half of its total population. For a long time, the participation of women in the political process at different level is very marginal. Due to various constraints they could not occupy the positions of power and assume leadership roles. They were also denied opportunities to participate in the administration, even in the making of decisions that affect their own lives and welfare (Anjuly and Kaushik 2007) 43.

Search has been working with marginalized women for the past 10 years to bring about social change and economic independence. In addition, the ultimate aim has been to bring SHG women into the political process, so that they can assert themselves as a decision maker in the local self-government institution.

3.29.5 PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS

The emphasis of Self Help Group is on enabling people to help themselves, i.e. self-reliance. The role of SHG, its organizations and their leadership is to create political spaces within which organizations, create alliances with other agencies. Building of capacities is based on sharing experiences, increasing the exposure of different sectors to each other. It meant building their capacities to move from apposition of marginality to one of centrality in decision making process. Another aspect is recognizing that SHG women learnt most effectively from their peers through an experimental


methodology. They have gained a great deal of self-confidence. Many SHGs have placed demands with Grama Sabha for drinking water, street lights, SGSY loans etc. Through these actions their self-esteem is being elevated. The women who felt helpless, now realize that they are secure not only in terms of credit support but also in terms of “feeling and members of the Groups”. There have been some amazing examples of attitudinal change induced by the formations and activities of SHGs. Many SHG members are happy to admit that illicit liquor brewing, wife beating and other atrocities against women have declined since the intervention of SHGs through antiliquor campaign.

Women are viewed as teachers, as the people who will inform the nature and content of group functioning through learning process. Elements of SHG process may be viewed as:

a) Capacity building of women’s collectives.

b) Peer learning exchanges.

c) Initiation of savings and credit groups

d) Training

e) Establishing linkages with development

f) Creating information net works

g) Searching for alternative framework for women’s development

h) Advocacy.

3.30 SHGs TRAINING

Certain topics of training will be imparted through the animators or representatives to the groups while some other topics will be imparted directly to the groups. Apart from the animator, two representatives from each group will also be imparted specific training in year one, along with the animator and thereafter two representatives would be trained by rotation for the next three years. In addition to regular training, refresher training will
also be provided to the animators and representatives. Specific performance teams would be formed for specific topics of group training where the audio-visual media would be used and films shown songs sung, dances, dramas and puppetry, etc. performed. Training of NGO staff, PIU staff, block level staff and bank staff has also been provided for.

3.30.1 Training Programmes

Mahalir Thittam provides different types of training envisaged for different participants are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.No.</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>No. of Modules</th>
<th>Days</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>SHG Members training</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Animators and Representatives training</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Representatives training (II year onwards)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Cluster level representatives training</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>NGO staff training</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Bank staff training</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>PIU Staff training</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>PMU staff training</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Training for communication teams</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Business and Skill training for micro enterprise development</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Based on activity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


3.30.2 Skill Training for Youth

Given the popularity of the State as an industrial investment destination, there is huge demand for skilled manpower in manufacturing and services sector. By providing relevant skill training, unemployed youth can be productively engaged benefiting the society as well as the individual. With this objective in mind, TNCDW has imparted skill training to 11,485 youth through reputed industrial houses and institutions like MRF, NOKIA, and
Saint Gobain among others. In the year 2008-2009, it is proposed to provide skill training to 25000 youth through reputed industrial houses and other institutions.

3.31 PANCHAYAT LEVEL FEDERATION (PLF)

In Mahalir Thittam, federations of SHGs are formed at Village Panchayat Level called Panchayat Level Federation (PLF). These federations, by pooling in talent and resources and exploiting economies of scale in production and marketing, can benefit member SHGs immensely. They can also guide and monitor functioning of SHGs in all Village Panchayats and strengthening them is the key for ensuring sustainability and self-reliance of SHGs. From 2006-07, the Government of Tamil Nadu have been taking various initiatives to strengthen the PLFs. 6,367 well-functioning PLFs have been provided seed money of Rs.10,000/- each. To strengthen the unity and team spirit, cultural competitions were organized among PLFs at Block and district levels. Rs.1.60 crores was sanctioned for the year 2007-08 for conduct of these competitions which drew overwhelming response from SHG members. PLF representative have been included as a member of credit rating team. Two representatives from PLF have been included in the payment committee for NREGA Scheme. One PLF representative has been proposed for inclusion in the committee for selection of Samathuvapuram beneficiaries. PLF certification has been made mandatory for processing NGO claims for new group formation, monitoring and training. Well-functioning PLFs are affiliated under Mahalir Thittam on par with NGOs for formation of new SHGs, monitoring etc.

3.32 MANIMEGALAI AWARDS

To encourage well-functioning SHGs and PLFs, the Government had announced Manimegalai awards at State and district levels. Awards are presented to 5 best PLFs and 10 best SHGs at the State level. One PLF selected as best at the district level and 3 SHGs found to be the best at the district level are given Manimegalai awards and the best SHG at the Block
level is given a certificate. The awards were presented for the year 2006-07 in September 2007 and have been instrumental in motivating the SHGs and PLFs to strive for better performance.

In 2007-08, to strengthen the unity and team spirit among SHGs members and bring out their hidden talents, cultural competitions were held among PLFs. Prizes and awards were distributed to the winners on Samathuva Pongal day at the cost of Rs.1.60 crore. SHGs members participated in large numbers and exhibited their talent in the competitions. Government had announced that Identity Cards will be issued to Mahalir Thittam SHGs to gain recognition in society and also to have easy access to Government offices and banks. Issue of identity cards has been taken up in four blocks on a pilot basis and will be catered to the entire state step by step. The government has earmarked Rs.2.50 crore for this purpose.

3.33 Conclusion

From the above conceptual background of women empowerment and self help groups it is understood that throughout the changes of history, women have collectively struggled against direct and indirect barriers to their self-development and their full social, economic and political participation. The organizations started struggle for women’s rights in the early part of the 20th century. At present women’s movement focuses its attention on equality and influenced policy and planning of the government for development and empowerment. In order to understand the activity of SHGs in the frame work of movement it is found that SHGs are organized to manage their economic activities better and are gaining empowerment in directions which are appropriate to their needs, interests and constraints.