4.1. EMPOWERMENT: CONCEPT AND ITS MEANING

Empowerment can be viewed as means of creating a social environment in which one can make decisions and make choices either individually or collectively for social transformation. It strengthens the innate ability by way of acquiring knowledge, power and experience (Hashemi Schuler and Riley, 1996).

Empowerment is the process of enabling or authorizing individual to think, take action and control work in an autonomous way. It is the process by which one can gain control over one’s destiny and the circumstances of ones lives. Empowerment includes control over resources (physical, human, intellectual and financial) and over ideology (beliefs, values and attitudes). (Baltiwalala, 1994). It is not merely a feel of greater extrinsic control, but also grows intrinsic capacity, greater self-confidence and an internal transformation of one’s consciousness that enables one to overcome external barriers to accessing resources or changing traditional ideology (Pinto, 2001).

Women’s empowerment is very essential for the development of society. Empowerment means individuals acquiring the power to think and act freely, exercises choice and fulfill their potential as full and equal members of society. As per the United National Development Fund
for women (UNIFEM), the term women’s empowerment means:

- Acquiring knowledge and understanding of gender relations and the ways in which these relations may be changed.
- Developing a sense of self-worth, a belief in one’s ability to secure desired changes and the right to control one’s life.
- Gaining the ability to generate choices exercise bargaining power.
- Developing the ability to organize and influence the direction of social change, to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally.

Thus, empowerment means a psychological sense of personal control or influence and a concern with actual social influence, political power and legal rights. It is a multi level construct referring to individuals, organizations and community. It is an international, ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to the control over these resources.

### 4.2 EMPOWERMENT AND EDUCATION

Education as means of empowerment of women can bring about a positive attitudinal change. It is therefore, crucial for the socio-economic and political progress of India. The Constitution of India empowers the state to adopt affirmative measures for prompting ways and means to empower women. Education significantly makes difference in the lives of women. These can be direct or indirect. Few are being mentioned here.

**a) Improved Economic Growth**

Education increases the economic, social and political opportunities available to women. It leads to direct economic benefits in the form of higher lifetime earnings for women. The society and community also benefit from the higher productivity of its labour force. Besides improving human capital and increasing economic growth, female
education also reduces the fertility rate. The lowering in the number of dependants is referred to as the “demographic gift”.

Keeping women illiterate clearly retards economic growth. Societies that do not invest in girls’ education pay a price for it in terms of slower growth and reduced incomes. Investments in female education start a virtuous cycle that leads to improved levels of income, growth and gender equality. Inequality in education is like a distortionary tax that misallocates resources, thereby reducing economic growth (Dollar and Gatti, 1999).

b) Lower Population Growth

Education increases women’s knowledge about controlling fertility and access to family planning services and often encourages them to delay the age at which they marry. In the field survey Table 5.2 indicates clearly that the higher literacy rate improves the monthly income of the family and vice-versa (Table 5.3). They also have more control over household resources (Table 5.6) and greater involvement in reproductive decisions. Women with more than a primary schooling had a smaller gender bias in sending children to school than women with less than primary schooling.

But the question arises if all sections of society do not have access to the right to education as a fundamental right, how can empowerment take place? And how can education lead to the promotion of other human rights? The political commitment behind many education campaigns has remained unfulfilled. Disparities in education between various social groups defined by region, area, caste, sex, class, disabilities etc. still exist. The lack of educational opportunities for girl is contrary to Article 10 of the CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women) states that governments should undertake all appropriate steps towards the elimination of any stereotyped concepts in all forms of education. They are indicative of government’s failure to deal with the problem of right to education. There is an urgent need to convert the government’s commitments regarding education into action. Only then it will be possible to use education as a key instrument for bringing changes in social and cultural attitudes in relation to human rights.
4.3 IMPACT OF EDUCATION ON WOMEN

The situation faced by women in India is one of the bleakest in the world. Of all the discrimination and denial of opportunity that these women suffer, the most damaging is the denial of the right and opportunity to education.

Widespread poverty and discriminatory cultural practices are frequently cited as prime reasons for the persistence of their gender gap in education. If poverty is the chief culprit, how do we explain the achievement of countries like Kenya, Vietnam and Tajekisthan, which have a lower per capita income than India but score much better, with literacy rates of 78 percent, 94 percent and 100 percent compared to 52 percent for India (1995). The corresponding literacy rates for these countries are: Kenya 70 percent, Vietnam 91 percent, Tajekisthan 100 percent and India 38 percent (Haq and Haq, 1998).

Cultural bias surely does exist and poverty does constitute a factor in influencing educational attainments especially for girls. But it would be very dangerous to limit the analysis of causation to these factors. Valid as these constraints are, they all too often serve to camouflage the political indifference, bureaucratic inertia and social apathy that lie at the core of the problem. The status quo thus becomes a way of life. Breaking this circle requires new forms of realization and mobilization, not just of resources but also of communities themselves. In a wide range of low-income countries, the hold of poverty and negative cultural factors have been broken by concerted political action, genuine people movements or because of a sustained public demand of education.

The 1980s and 1990s brought with them yet another daunting challenge. The expansion of the market economy and industrialization and globalization brought increased inequalities, resulting in lose of livelihoods, erosion of natural resources and with it decreased women’s access to water, fuel, fodder and traditional survival resources. It also brought new forms of exploitation-displacement, tourism, sex trade and retrenchment to mention a few. Women are being pushed into less productive sectors. Increased pressure on rural resources accelerated migration to urban areas in search of livelihood. People from backward regions, tribal communities, disadvantaged castes and the displaced communities were being pushed against the wall. Women in such countries shouldered the brunt and this phenomenon was labelled ‘feminization of poverty’.
The word empowerment in the context of women in the Indian policy was used in 1986- Educational Policy which is known as the “NPE 1986” and the title of the chapter is ‘Education for Women’s Equality and Empowerment’. It has actually two aspects — empowerment first means self empowerment that is women being able to help themselves through whatever is imparted to them and use them to get strength for themselves. It may be education, health or so on and the second is that they should be able to help others to become empowered.

Education is important because literacy has become a tool of evaluating a person—whether one can read or write. Illiteracy has become a very pejorative word in our society. Today we find that literacy itself gives you status. If one can read or write is educated he/she may get access to so much of information. Information about what you can access for others and for yourself, whether it is educational facilities, health, employment opportunity, legal literacy and so forth. These are very extrinsic reasons, but intrinsically education is important for individual development and confidence.

But we see today that even where all these conditions exist, women do not come forward to claim their human entitlements. True empowerment is achieved only if women themselves ‘realize’ that it is important for them to be empowered to enjoy a just, fair and happy life.

Then why is it that they hesitate to come forward? A simple answer to this can be that our government is corrupt and the justice system long drawn are expensive. But there is more to this than putting the blame on “systems”. There is an “inherent” reluctance to leave the “comfort zone of self and societal notions” on one hand and the lack of “skill” to handle such situations in real life on the other (Women’s Link- Jan-Mar 2005).

Empowerment of women as a goal of development projects and programs has gained wider acceptance since 1990s. It is not a simple linear process. It has long been argued by various UN agencies that the critical determinant of women’s socio-economic status is education, and that education is the key to achieving social development by improving the well being of the girls and women and thus promoting gender equity. The experience of numerous programs in the government and the NGO sector shows that it is
indeed possible. Empowerment of women was one of the nine primary objectives of the Ninth Plan (1997-2002) and every effort was made to create an enabling empowerment where women could freely exercise their rights within and outside their home as equal Partner with men.

Education is one of the most critical factors responsible for the development of a human person. Right to education, therefore, is held as a very important human right. It is the very foundation of good citizenship. Today it is the principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. In these days, it is doubtful any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. The international community has realized the importance of education for individual and collective well being made explicit provisions in several human rights instruments on the rights to education. The Constitution of India was recently amended to provide for the right to compulsory elementary education to children falling between the age group of 6-14 years. Among the world’s 900 million literacy people, women outnumber men two to one. Girls constitute the majority of 130 million children without access to primary education (Human Development Report 1995). The illiteracy rate of women is 55.16 percent as against 75.85 percent for men (2001). They can be seen as beggars on road crossing and rag pickers. Kabeer (1990) estimates that the deaths of young girls in India exceed those of young boys by over 300,000 each year and every sixth infant death is specifically due to gender discrimination. Of the 15 million baby girls born in India each year, nearly 25 percent will not live to see there 15th birth day (Patel, 1995). Of late, the girl child’s educational needs received special attention in the wake of national and international efforts on empowering women.

Education, in a broad sense, essentially involves penning the mind, enhancing self-esteem and self-confidence, building a sense of positive self-worth, accessing information and tools of knowledge and acquiring the ability to negotiate this unequal and unjust world from a position of strength. No society has ever liberated itself - economically, politically or socially –without a sound base of educated women. Many countries experiences around the world have demonstrated that investment in educating women is the most precious investment a society can ever make.
4.4 HEALTH AND SAFE MOTHERHOOD

Women’s health is another important issue under Human Resource Development and also highest prioritized area in family welfare programs. However, the accumulated research evidences show that the achievement levels in providing better health care and safe motherhood for women, especially for rural women, are not at expected levels. In India, the highest number of deaths in the age group of 16 to 25 is recorded among women. Anaemia is one of the most commonly found deficiency among the women and it is also mentioned by several studies that they are often not too healthy when they bear the first child and none of them are physically ready to bear a second child. A pathetic reality is that nearly 88 percent of the pregnant women (1985-95) reported to be anaemic. World Health Organization figures also show that the lifetime risk of dying from pregnancy or child-birth-related causes is one in twenty in some developing countries, compared to one in ten thousand in some industrialized countries. About one in five of these deaths stem from unsafe abortions.

The available data says that in India about 20 percent of the women in the age group of 15-49 years are at the risk of unintended pregnancy. Coming to anti-natal care only 10 percent of the pregnant women receive it on an average in rural India. In this regard Tamil Nadu, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Punjab, West Bengal is in better position than other states. Nearly 33 percent of the babies are under low birth weight category. During 1993, 5.5 percent stillbirths are recorded at all India level and this percentage is more in Bihar and West Bengal (around 15%). The reasons for such high percentage of stillbirths are usually associated with low age of mother, poor nutritional level of women and low utilization of primary health care.

During 1998 male child mortality rates was at 29 percent where as female child mortality recorded as high as 42 percent. In fact, child mortality better captures the effect of gender discrimination than infant mortality, as malnutrition and medical interventions are more important in this age group. If female children mortality is at higher level, it is likely that girls have unequal access to resources. The research evidences are saying that there are noteworthy gender disparities in expenditure on health in Indian society.
Though most of the deaths occurring at pre and post pregnancy stages are preventable, mere negligence at formal and informal level health care lead to death. Primary health centres at rural areas are not catering the health needs of women at required levels and the reasons are obviously well known facts. Our field study reveals that these primary health centres either remained closed or no adequate facilities available. Mostly, people go for village medicines, soothe-sayers or witchcrafts. Lack of basic health education among women is another prime reason for neglecting their basic ailments at preventable stage. The concept of health education is negligible and health counselling is almost not existent in India.

Women are particularly vulnerable to Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD), including AIDS and their bodies are also at risk of being infected with HIV in the womb. In this area statistical information is not available. However, World Health Organization report says that during 1997 there were about 4,100,000 people in India found to be infected with HIV. Out of this total experts are assuming that 50 percent will be women. However, with World Bank/World Health Organization aid several special programs were initiated to create awareness about this dreadful disease the achievement is said to be at below minimum level.

Discrimination against girl children start even in the womb and untold number of female foetuses is aborted in prenatal sex-selection stage. This is, in spite of legislations, prevalent in many parts of India. In many communities the mothers of girl children are sometimes neither get nutrition nor they care when they are pregnant.

Empowerment literally means ‘enable or authorize’. When we talk of empowerment of women, it entails political, social, economic and cultural aspects. Translating this into practical lives means conditions wherein women are able to participate and have access and control of resources and opportunities in all these areas of life. An idealistic approach is to make laws that promote gender equality, setup institutions to implement these laws and most important, spread awareness and education about them so that the just and fair conditions are created for all.
4.5 WORK PARTICIPATION

On the world level, women and girls together carry two-third of the burden of the world’s work yet receive only a tenth of the world’s income. They form 40% of the paid labour force. Though women constitute half of the world’s population yet they own less than one percentage of the world’s property.

The condition of women in India is more miserable than the rest of the world in almost every field of social life. They are paid half of three-quarters of the money while their male counterparts earn for the same job. India is predominantly agricultural country. Women do more than half of the total agricultural work. But their work is not valued. On an average a woman works 15 to 16 hours a day unpaid at home and underpaid outside.

According to 1971 census, every one-fourth works in the country is an agricultural labour. One third of the agricultural labour is female. Only 2.5 percent of the central government employees are women.

According to National Committee on Women, the growth in the percentage of women labourer force in the organized sector is minimal in the last sixty years i.e. 3.44 percent in 1911 to 17.35 percent in 1971; besides the work load either in the field or in the factories or offices, the women have to do the household such as cooking, washing, cleaning up the house etc. The younger women besides all these have to carry the burden of early pregnancy, childbirth and breast-feeding. In terms of help offered to people for their various function women seem to receive the least attention from the society.

4.6 WOMEN EMPOWERMENT PERSPECTIVE

The term empowerment pre-supposes primacy of power over other dimensions. We speak of women’s sharing of political power and participation in government. An important issue related to women’s empowerment is the reservation of seats for them in the state legislature and union parliament. The 73\textsuperscript{rd} and 74\textsuperscript{th} Constitutional Amendment Act 1992 has provided 33 percent seats for women in Panchayats and municipal bodies.

Though the experience of the Indian Panchayat Raj Institutions, one million women have actively entered political life in India. Since the creation of the quota
system, local women—the vast majority of the illiterates and poor—have come to occupy as much as 43 percent of seats—spurring the election of increasing numbers of women at the district, provincial and national level. Since the onset of PRI, the percentages of women in various levels of political activity have risen from 4-5 percent to 25-40 percent.

According to an Indian writer and activist Devaki Jain, “the positive discrimination of Panchayat Raj Institutions has initiated a momentum of change. Women’s entry into local government in such large numbers often more than the required 33 percent, and their success in campaigning, including the defeat of male candidates, has shattered the myth that women are not interested in politics, and have no time to meetings or to undertake all the other work that is required in political party processes. Panchayat Raj Institutions reminds us of central truth: power is not something people give away, it has to be negotiated, and some time wrested from the powerful.” says Noeleen Heyzer, executive director of UNIFEM, “this is one of best innovations in grass-roots democracy in the world” (Women’s Link, Jul. to Sept., 2003, p. 30). Seats in local bodies have been reserved for women for their active participation in decision-making, but the parliament has so far failed to provide a similar representation to women. Ugly scenes were witnessed over tabling the women’s reservation bill that has brought the grim truth into sharper focus that Indian society continues to be male dominated and male hegemony is still the dominated reality. In India, the participation of women in politics has actually been declined since the days of freedom movement (10%). It reached a high of 8 percent in 1984 elections. This figure has not crossed since then.

The account of measures taken for women’s empowerment in India clearly shows that there is a deep concern in the country to uplift their social and economic conditions, so that they may plan an active role in the task of national developments. Government is not serious for the political participation of women; the data shows that they are lagging behind in political sphere.

4.7 STRATEGIES OF EMPOWERING DALIT WOMEN

Empowerment of the Dalit women is a means to poverty alleviation. The goals of poverty eradication can be effectively achieved if Dalit women could be organized into
groups for community participation as well as for assertion of their rights. Any strategy of sustainable development relating to poverty eradication has to involve the large number of poor women. Social mobilization and building organization of the poor are essential prerequisites for poverty alleviation. There are several strategies, which enable overall development of Dalit women. The following strategies were found more effective for overall development. They are:

a) Empowerment of women through development of women and children in the rural areas/ Self-Help Groups.

b) Empowerment of women through education and training.

c) Empowerment through political participation.

d) Empowerment evaluation as strategies of empowering women.

These different strategies are not independent and exclusive but used interactively.

a) Empowerment of women through DWCRA/SHG approach

Women’s empowerment is used to alleviate poverty and other socio-economic issues. Self- Help movement through thrift and savings has been taken of as a mass movement under the government program of development of women and children in the Rural Areas (DWCRA), some of the State Governments assisted these self-help groups by providing revolving fund and helping them in micro-enterprise activities. DWCRA program of self-help groups helped the women to earn additional income. With improvement in economic status, there is enhancement in social status as well. These women show increased awareness of family welfare, promote their children’s nutritional and educational status, shows concern about environment and health, issues of sanitation and drinking water.

Thus mobilizing the poor women in rural areas for self-help group formation either State Government assisted SHGs or SHGs assisted by Non-Government Organization is an effort toward participation of women in poverty alleviation and subsequently increases their awareness towards various social problems. Building the common corpus is the first step toward empowerment of women. The Report of the
Independent South Commission on Poverty Alleviation (1992), stated that when poor participate as subjects and not as objects of the development process, it is possible to generate growth, human development and equity, individually the poor women would not be able to overcome obstacles in their struggle for survival, security and self-respect, which they could do through collectives action. The support mechanisms like government and non-government organizations provide the poor women a partnership. The poor collectively can start income generation activities with their own resources to achieve self-reliance with the support of this organization. Thus, starting from the socio-economic base the poor women show increasing awareness, cooperation, self-reliance, self-management and move towards social consciousness, empowerment and self-respect. The emancipation of the Dalit women from economic and social bondage enables to become more productive. The establishment of a self-reliant activity will mutually reinforce the process of promoting positive attitudes and values.

b) Empowerment of women through education and training

One of the most critical components in the development of a society is the investment in human development. The South Asian countries are poorest, most illiterate, malnourished and least gender-sensitive. The Human Development Report on South Asia (1998) shows that South Asia has the lowest adult literacy rate (49%) in the world, which is lower than that of sub-Saharan Africa (57%). In India public primary education facilities have been expanded and national literacy shows an increase of 38 percent in 1991 to 65.38 percent in 2001. Participation of women in education program has grown faster than those of men. Female literacy increased two the half times faster than male literacy between 1970 and 2001. However, these achievements are small as India still accounts for 30 percent of the total adult literates all over world, where 24 percent of girls of primary age are still not in school compared with 16 percent of boys. Poverty and other economic and social pressure continue to be the major challenge to the achievement of education for all. Keeping girls out of the school is costly and undermines developments. Poverty can be effectively tackled by educating the girls. Educated women keep their families healthier, show concern about their children’s education and nutrition. Total literacy campaign started by the National Literacy Commission in some regions in India brought rapid social change. The Non-Government Organization (NGOs) plays a
significant role in the area of education. To large extent the NGO activities have been confined to non-formal education sector. Now a partnership is emerging between the NGOs in the area of basic education as seen in the model of Lok Jumbish, a government-sponsored project for primary education in Rajasthan. Various NGOs are participating in the formal education sector, for example, Action Aid, Plan International, Aga Khan Foundation etc. NGO action in primary education emphasizes delivery system of quality education to the marginalized people like, poor women and girls. Programs of formal and non-formal education are emphasized by the government in collaboration with local NGOs and the communities. The NGOs use the strategy of popular education in spreading knowledge among people. This is seen in people’s participation in developing “IEC” (Information, Education and Communication) package of spreading knowledge about HIV/AIDS, health promotion, environmental risks, etc. In the popular education, cultural forms of education are used like, drama, music, stories, etc. Popular education is effective in increasing awareness towards various social issues like, immunization, girls’ education, sexual harassment, etc. Popular education can be applied anywhere, adapting to local context, the ideology and culture of the people with in the existing political system. Thus, the NGOs can play a significant role in empowering women through education and training and it is also the basis in the strategy of women’s participation in political field.

c) Political participation and empowerment

There is low representation of women at all levels of political institutions. Women still face major obstacles in seeking higher positions in society. Political participation is a human right, recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Women are poorly represented at different levels of political life and decision-making. Thus, there is widespread neglect of women’s priorities by politicians and bureaucrats. As per the Human Development Report, 1999 women hold only 12.7 percent of the world’s parliamentary seats and only 8.7 percent of those in the least developed countries. In India, the process of politically empowering through reservation in the local bodies has helped in the wider mobilization. On many occasions, elected women have provided the
leadership for organizing women and get their legitimate demands fulfilled like, widow pensions, gas connections, etc.

There is a growing realization among the women that local elections are a means to bring positive change in their lives. In different parts of the country, the SHGs have jointly put a women candidate for the election in the local bodies such as Zila Parishad, Gram Panchayat, etc. Women are motivated to change the traditions. The women’s political campaigns refer to solving the issues that affect their daily lives like safe drinking water, schools, health centres, roads, etc. some women have taken the agenda further by displaying a mature understanding of the contexts in which the political economy functions. In our society men, having attitudes resist the political empowerment of women. There is a feeling that women should only contest the reserved seats and not the general seats. In some parts of our country, there is some change, for example, women in the villages of the Hill State of Uttaranchal are waging their own political battle of assertion and articulation of identification. Several NGOs working in the area tries to educate women about the voting behaviour and election procedures. Elected women members learn to negotiate their newfound positions in an inherently male dominated system, fighting the adverse institutionalized practices like, corruption. Women face many obstacles while contesting election such as sabotage, threats, boycott and pressure from family. However, women on gaining the political power can bring rapid change in the lives of other women and attain equality.

d) Empowerment evaluation and strategy of empowering women

Empowerment evaluation is the basis of empowering women and community development. Empowerment evaluation reflects the process of participatory communication. SHG formation, popular education and political participation are all based on the process of participatory communication. Empowerment evaluation as a capacity building process is based on the principles of participatory inquiry research and evaluation. Its objective is to highlight community member’s own knowledge and to empower them. This can be attained by participating the women in each stage of program development that is, need assessment program, objectives, implementation monitoring and evaluation. Empowerment evaluation would promote self-determination and community control. The traditional evaluation is done by the professional experts, usually
for funding of the organization. It is a close decision-making process and community participation is limited to providing feedback. In the empowerment or participatory evaluation there is shared responsibility and decision making power lies with the participants. In the empowerment evaluation participants not only are evolved but also control the process.

Despite its focus on self-determination and collaboration empowerment evaluation and traditional external evaluation are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the empowerment evaluation process produces a rich data source that enables a more complete external examination. Self-determination defines as the ability to decide one’s own course in life, forms the basis of empowerment evaluation. It consist of numerous interconnected capabilities such as the ability to identify and express needs, establish goals or expectations and plan of action to achieve them, identify resources, make rational choices from various alternative, take appropriate steps to pursue the objectives and evaluate the results. Women face resistance because a traditional social structures, norms and values. NGOs can facilitate the process by training the people. Training, facilitation, advocacy and liberation are the facets of empowerment. Liberation means being freed or freeing oneself from pre-existing roles and constraints. It often involves conceptualization of oneself and others. Empowerment evaluation can also be liberating, as women liberate them from traditional expectations and roles, find new opportunities in perceiving existing resources in a new light, and redefine their identities and future roles. Empowerment evaluation is a long-term process resulting improvement of quality of life of community with support from development agencies.

4.8 GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

a) Reservations

The Government of India has made structural provisions to uplift the socio-economic condition of the Scheduled Caste, through a policy of reservations or protective discrimination. Protective discrimination is an affirmative state action (Lal, 1986) that promotes Sanskritisation process among the Scheduled Castes. Scheduled Caste person changes his or her customs, ritual ideology and way of life in the direction of higher
castes (Guru, 1986). Protective discriminations have three components: 1) political reservation (articles 330 and 332), which consists in reservation of 18% of seats for Scheduled Castes in legislative Assemblies and Panchayats; 2) Educational reservations [articles 15(4)] and 29 that require state and union territories to reserve for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes 20 percent of all seats in educational and technical institutions; and 3) percent job reservations [articles 16 (4), 320 (4)] and 333 requiring 15 percent and 7 percent position to be reserved for them at all levels in government and public sector undertaking (Shah, 1986). Reservations prevent total injustice promotes social mobility and leads to class-consciousness among the Scheduled Castes besides guaranteeing a minimum share (Khan, 1994).

The policy of reservations has helped mostly those who are now in the higher income groups; but only less than 5 percent in rural areas got jobs through reservations (Selvanathan, 1989). Data from Tamil Nadu show that the Scheduled Castes Hindus are somewhat better represented in the higher occupational categories compared to the Scheduled Castes Christians. This might be because of the reservations policy that benefits Hindus and not Christian Scheduled Castes (Balakrishnan, 1993). Unfortunately, implementation of reservation policies has so far not been fully satisfactory (Vijayendre & Pradeep, 1982). Scheduled Castes are conscious of the ineffectiveness of the policies of protective discrimination of the government, since the advance of Scheduled Castes is often blocked by stubborn social forces. The civil rights enforcement cell that is expected to look into the non-implementation of reservations and economic deprivations of the Scheduled Castes is more a laughing stock than a helpful agency as it has no power to investigate and proceeds further (Khan, 1993).

Besides, a long tradition of oppression and servitude makes it difficult for the Scheduled Castes to developed in a short time the confidence they required for the total utilization of the benefits provide by the government (Beteill, 1969). Subharao (1982) suggests that while reservation policy is a must, it should not impair telnet and excellence. One of the consequences of reservations, however, is that they will accentuate the alienation of Scheduled Castes, they will continue to be a separate category to enjoy the benefits of reservations and thus remains unintegrated with the mainstream of the society (Sinha, 1986).
b) Concessions

To enable the Scheduled Castes to secure professional jobs, a number of concessions are given to them: some of these are, relaxation in age, payable fee, standard of suitability, experience and qualification (Brochure, 1988), Chitnis (1986) suggests that social class considerations and vested interests seem to operate imperceptibly in the manner in which requirement for the several occupational positions available in society are defined. Requirements are not defined purely in terms of knowledge or skill required. Expectations regarding “suitable” manners, bearing, behaviour, values, style of life, and functioning are subtly involved in such a manner that the nexus between social class/family background and occupational placement is retained. Hence, one of the relaxations of rules for jobs is that Scheduled Castes be interviewed separately to ensure that they are not judged in comparison with other general candidates (Rozika, 1982).

Unfortunately, the bureaucrats are generally unhelpful to the Scheduled Castes (Khan, 1979). They do not implement the various welfare programs (Kakade, 1990). The programmes or schemes, designed for the Scheduled Caste, are formulated at the top (central and state government levels) and so local needs are generally overlooked. Such an approach leads to failure of reaching the objective. What is needed is area specific programs (Parashar, 1995). If Scheduled Castes have not taken much advantage of these schemes, it is because of the ineffective role of village officials, who neither make the scheme known to them nor help them in the cumbersome procedures (Khan, 1979). Another reason for the slow development of Scheduled Castes is that the special programs meant for their development tent to be formulated in an ad hoc manner (Report, 1983). According to Nautiyal and Sharma (1979), some of the serious pitfalls regarding the quantum and utilisation of financial assistance to Scheduled Castes are: 1) inadequate financial or material assistance; 2) delay in grants of stipends or scholarships; 3) poor hostel facilities for students; 4) misutilisation of financial assistance by students; 5: cumbersome and bureaucratic procedures followed to grant financial assistance; and 6) lack of awareness on the part of Scheduled Castes of benefits meant for them.

Other reasons suggested by the authors for the failure of the schemes are absence of a follow-up of the implemented scheme; lack of seriousness on the implementing
scheme or on bank to disburse quota amount leading to year-end-rush. However, insist Shukla and Verma (1993), when there is monitoring of the implementation and evaluation of the schemes, they seem more political than administrative. Parvathamma (1989) reports that only about 10 percent to 15 percent of the rural Scheduled Castes know of their Constitutional benefits.

c) Social legislation


The various laws were enacted to raise the social status of women have failed to remove social prejudices and social inequalities. In India, laws are violated with impunity without fear of any deterrent action or social disapproval. Everyday we read in the newspaper about dowry deaths, rape, abduction, trafficking of women, sexual harassment at work place and eve testing in buses and streets. Pattern of crime rates of 1999 over 1998 shows a slight drop in dowry deaths from 6975 to 6696, but much of these cases go unreported (NCRB 1998-99). Half the number of women in India is killed in their bedrooms or one woman is killed every 102 minutes in the name of dowry. In India, 6000 dowry murders are committed each year. This really exists even though the dowry prohibition act has been in existence for 41 years and there are virtually no arrests under the act.

In recent year, there has been an alarming rise in atrocities against women in India. On an average there are more than 15000 rapes every year in India and the conviction rate below 30 percent. National Crime Research Bureau figures indicate that the incidence of rape has increased: from 15330 in 1997 to 16496 in 2000. The data
reveals that 20 percent were mostly in the age group of 16 to 25 years and 10 percent were minor girls below 15 years of age. A study conducted among men and women in Jullandhar district of Punjab in north India reports that about 75 percent of women reported being beaten frequently by their husbands; and likewise about 75 percent men reported beating their wives (Jahan, 1994).

Government has passed legislation to curb the misuse of amniocentesis techniques (1975) for sex selection and abortion of female foetuses. In 1971 there were 930 females for every 1000 males. A decade later this figure had increased to 934, but by 2001, instead of continuing to rise, the ratio dropped to 933, lower than the 1971 figure. The sex ratio is one of the lowest in the world. Desai Sonalda (1994) reports that there are posters in Mumbai advertising sex-determination tests that read, “it is better to pay 500 rupees now than 50000 rupees (in dowry) later.” There is a cultural and religious bias against women. A man cannot attain ‘Moksha’ unless he has a son to light his pyre. Even the woman who espouses feminism chooses to abort a female child in her womb. The woman herself has internalized social bias against a female child and in favour of male child. Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PNDT) (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act, 1994 that came into force on January 1, 1996 has failed to check aborting of female foetus. The PNDT clinics are flourishing in cities and towns. Mobiles clinics are also functional in the field.

A South Indian woman working for Haryana Urban Development Authority (HUDA) office. A local man approached her and said “Sister, could you find a girl for my son?”, and continued “you bring one from your state”. She was curious. “Why from my state, why not someone from here?”, “There are no girls here, we have been searching for a bride for him but can’t find one”. He was downcast.

When she visited another Haryanvi family recently, the daughter in the family was at home. She had a newborn baby girl. The father told her if it were a son they would have celebrated as the old saying goes, “Chhore pe baje thali, chhori thekere phoren” which means “announce the birth of a son by beating of brass plates but at the birth of daughter break earthen pots”. The man continued, with pride in his custom, that at the time of marriage a bride is blessed by saying “Ashta putra sowbhagyavati bhave” which
means, “may you be blessed with eight sons”. Once conception takes place, mantras from Atharva, one of the four most sacred books of Hinduism, are prescribed for chanting so that if the foetus is female it is transformed into a male. The Indian psychic is still frozen with the notion of having male children.

It seems parents are mostly obsessed with the birth of boys. One son is a cause for joy, while two are seen as a lifetime celebration, the traditional thinking being that if one dies, at least the other will live to take care of the parents. In the bargain, women who give birth to girls are looked down. Most often the girl child is considered an economic loss as her marriage and dowry crush her family under huge burden of debts.

Despite the Constitutional provisions and a host of legislations enacted to protect women the ground reality is distressing. Misuse sex-determination tests and the termination of pregnancy in the event of female foetus give an indication of the despicable behavior pattern.

The fact is that women’s exploitation is a reality and gender justice is fragile myth. Unless there is recognition of her rights by her counterpart, her basic rights, gender justice would only be a “lip service” with no tangible results.

Fight for justice by women or cry for gender equality is not a fight against men. It is a fight against traditions that have chained them – a fight against attitude that is ingrained in the society; it is a fight against proverbial Lakshman Rekha, which is different for men and women.

In India, Indian Penal Code sections 354 (Criminal assault of women to outrage women’s modesty) and 509 (word, gesture or act intended to insult the modesty of woman) provide relief to victims of sexual harassment. Still, with the interpretation largely left to the discretion of the police officer, women groups have since the early 1980’s voiced their protest against the malice. The Protection of Women Against Sexual Harassment at the Workplace Bill 2007 is designed to defend women against sexual abuse.
Women activists have been critical of this because of its provision that calls for punishing the women who seek the procedure. These women may be under pressure to bear a male child.

A 1976 amendment to child marriage restraint act raise the minimum legal age for marriage from 15 to 18 for young women and from 18 to 21 for young men. However, in many rural communities, illegal child marriage age still common. In some rural areas, nearly half the girls between 10 to 14 years are married. Because there is pressure on women to prove fertility conceiving as soon as possible after marriage, adolescent marriage is synonymous with adolescent child bearing; roughly 10-15 percent of all birth takes place to women in their teens.

4.9 GOVERNMENT ENACTMENTS

The National Commission for Women has in the last few years introduced several new bills in the parliament from time to time towards eradication of many social evils. Some of the significant enactments are mentioned here.

The Hindu Widow Re-Marriage Act of 1856

In the traditions at Hindu society there was a ban on widow remarriage ─ it was one of the most important evils from which women in the traditional Hindu society suffered a lot. This act allowed widow to remarry and section 5 of this Act ensured her to enjoy all the rights, which a married woman did.

The Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929

The practice of child marriage was another social evil from which women in traditional Hindu society suffered a lot. Age at marriage for girls was 9 or 10 and after passing this act the minimum marriageable age of women was fixed to 15 years. Later this age was increased up to 18 years.

The Hindu Women’s Right to Property Act of 1937
In the traditional society women had no property rights. In the eyes of law she was a minor or ward. This act recognized a widow of a deceased person as a surviving personality with the same right as his in the joint property. Thus, through this Act women in the Hindu society received the property right to a limited extent.

**The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955**

This Act has recognized the equal rights of men and women in the matters of marriage and divorce. Under the provision of this Act either the man or woman can present a petition in a court of law for divorce, wife has got equal right to divorce husband.

**The Hindu Succession Act of 1956**

This Act recognized an equal right for women in the matter of inheritance of property. She can inherit the property of her father along with her brothers. She can also sell or mortgage the inherited property or use it for herself. For the first time absolute ownership was conferred to a woman through this Act.

**The suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls Act of 1956-57**

This Act aims to deal with the problem of prostitution and to promote the welfare of fallen women. Main objectives of this Act are to reduce the scope of prostitution and to reform prostitution under this Act. Every state is expected to set up protective home and to appoint women police and women social workers. In protective homes these fallen women will be given training in tailoring, toy and basket making and other crafts so that they may earn for their maintenance in proper way.

**The Dowry Prohibition Act 1961**

The main objective of this Act is to abolish giving and taking dowry at the time of marriage. The term dowry refers to a valuable property or thing, which is determined by the parties to a marriage for a marriage. The practice of dowry had produced very bad effects. Dowry system, dowry cases have not been reduced. Still this Act makes some effort in bringing social change.
The above mentioned are the important legislations, which brought an upward trend in the status of women in India.

4.10 CONCLUSION

Thanks to the international agencies such as UN, women empowerment is the key slogan of the 90s and of the new millennium. Empowerment of women means….

- Acquiring knowledge and understand of gender relations and the ways in which these relations may be changed.
- Developing a sense of self-worth, a belief in one’s ability to secure desired changes and the right to control one’s life.
- Gaining the ability to generate choices and exercise bargaining power.
- Developing the ability to organize and influence the direction of social change, to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally.

The concept of empowerment of women means psychological sense of personal control in the persons, domestic, social and political realms. It is a process by which one is authorized to think, act and control resources in an autonomous way.

The most critical component of women’s empowerment is found to be education. It leads to improved economic growth, low fertility rate, health and sanitation and an awareness of factors that disempowered women. Work participation rate and political participation also grows in women’s education.

The expansion of the market economy and industrialization and globalization brought increased inequalities, resulting in lose of livelihoods, erosion of natural resources and with it decreased women’s access to water, fuel, fodder and traditional survival resources. It also brought new forms of exploitation-displacement, tourism, sex trade and retrenchment to mention a few. Women are being pushed into less productive sectors. Increased pressure on rural resources accelerated migration to urban areas in search of livelihood. People from backward regions, tribal communities, disadvantaged castes and the displaced communities were being pushed against the wall. Women in such countries shouldered the brunt and this phenomenon was labelled ‘feminization of poverty.'
Women’s health is an important component of women’s empowerment. However the accumulated research evidences show that the achievement levels in providing better health care and safe motherhood for women, especially for rural women, are not at expected levels. In India, the highest number of deaths in the age group of 16 to 25 is recorded among women. Anaemia is one of the most commonly found deficiency among the women and it is also mentioned by several studies that they are often not too healthy when they bear the first child and none of them are physically ready to bear a second child. A pathetic reality is that nearly 88 percent of the pregnant women (1985-95) reported to be anaemic. World Health Organization figures also show that the lifetime risk of dying from pregnancy or child-birth-related causes is one in twenty in some developing countries, compared to one in ten thousand in some industrialized countries. About one in five of these deaths stem from unsafe abortions.

Work participation empowers women. However the condition of women in India is more miserable than the rest of the world in almost every field of social life. They are paid half of three-quarters of the money while their male counterparts earn for the same job. India is predominantly agricultural country. Women do more than half of the total agricultural work. But their work is not valued. On an average a woman works 15 to 16 hours a day unpaid at home and underpaid outside.

Among strategies for women empowerment, Government policies such as 73 and 74th amendment of Indian Constitution, Reservation policies, concessions, social legislation and enactment of certain acts were found be very important. However, the effect of such strategies failed to reach the target due to various bureaucratic and systemic failures.

In this regard, the SHG approach towards women empowerment is found to be highly promising and effective. In the next chapter, we shall discuss in detail how SHGs mediate economic empowerment of women.