the choice of a research problem. Drawing in and upon the personal experiences of a researcher is a distinguishing feature of feminist research. “Personal experience typically is irrelevant in mainstream research, or is thought to contaminate a project’s objectivity. In feminist research, by contrast, it is relevant and repairs the projects’ pseudo objectivity”, (Reinharz, 1992). Reemphasizing the role of subjectivity in social science research, Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah argue, “Is it possible to really eliminate subjectivity? Does it not exist in the choice of subject matter, the method and presentation?” (Gandhi and Shah, 1991). A deliberate and total banishment of subjectivity, they argue in research reduces the research process and writing to a factually correct but badly mechanical process, losing many of its insights and emotions.

The choice of the research problem around “Understanding Women’s Empowerment in Andhra Pradesh through a study of Women’s Collectives in Rural Telangana,” has been guided and shaped by several influences over time. My earlier academic training/grounding in Sociology (at the master’s level) as well as introduction to women’s studies as part of the same provided me some of the most critical theoretical perspectives for engaging with questions of women in development. Being an active member of Anveshi (a Hyderabad-based research center for women’s studies) during the early part of the 1990’s provided both the context and space for further engagement with these questions from a gender perspective and within women’s studies as an academic discipline. Looking back, my journey in and out of mainstream academic research over the past 10-15 years has been fuelled by a constant need to both test and refine theory in the light of field realities and varying contexts. Long periods of work and stay in rural and tribal areas in Andhra Pradesh and closer interactions, especially with women in these areas has meant challenging strongly held theoretical assumptions about development and rural women and calling into question my own self-location as a women researcher from an educated, upper class and caste background. In many ways, this process of rethinking theory through the cultural-historical map of varying contexts and subjects has enabled reformulating theory itself in new ways, avoiding “totalizing discourses” and positions in order to account for and bring in the diversity of experiences, contexts and lived realities of different subjects.
Two important influences that have very definitely determined the choice of this research project must be mentioned here. The first was my M.Phil research project during the period 1994-96 on Women’s Role in the Anti-Arrack movement in Nellore district of A.P that provided both a critical starting point and analytical lens for looking at questions of women’s empowerment. The context in which this movement began in Nellore district was marked by a combination of socio-economic, political conditions, which made arrack itself a political issue for women. The movement importantly coincided with the adult literacy mission initiated by the Government of Andhra Pradesh, which provided women a forum to meet and discuss their experiences. Inspired by women’s experiences of successfully preventing sale of arrack in Dubugunta, a small coastal village in Nellore district in 1991, women in several other villages both within and outside the district took up a struggle against arrack, thus forcing the then government to declare a total ban on sale of all forms of liquor in the State. The movement marked an important departure in the history of the women’s movement in Andhra Pradesh in terms of demonstrating grassroots women’s mobilization and collective strength in challenging the State and other patriarchal institutions in the process of addressing their demands. More significantly, within the development context, this movement signaled a decisive shift in terms of innovative strategies for organizing women into village-level collectives as part of an overall approach to empowering women, especially in the rural context. In the aftermath/wake of the anti-arrack movement, the organization of women in Nellore district into large number of village-level thrift and credit groups (popularly known as “Podupu Lakshmi”) became a model for the entire State to emulate and scale-up the approach not only for delivering various development programs and schemes but also forming a key strategy to tackle the larger issue of rural poverty in the State.

A second important influence that shaped the choice of this research problem was my experiences of working for over 6 years (1996-2001) with Yakshi, a Hyderabad based NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) and a community-based adivasi people’s organization (Girijana Deepika) working in the tribal regions of East Godavari district of A.P. For more than ten years, Yakshi has been working primarily to strengthen and support adivasi people’s organizations, in the process of their struggle for self-
determination, gaining control over local resources like land and forests and political autonomy. Quite central to this process was the revival of community-based indigenous forums like “Gotti” (an informal community space amongst the native adivasis that faced the threat of complete erosion) where people could interact on a regular basis, communicate ideas, share information, reflect on their own situation and evolve suitable strategies to address their issues. The revival of the Gotti, and the experiences of mobilizing both men and women in the villages into this forum threw up several questions, debates and discussions around women’s participation in these spaces, gender relations and the idea of empowerment for all of us involved at different levels – amongst men and women in the villages, activists from the local people’s organization and for a support organization like Yakshi. This process sharply brought in questions of gender relations and patriarchal ideologies in relation to several issues in the area – the adivasis people’s struggle for control over their own resources, questions of self-determination, participation and perspectives on development, political autonomy etc.

While the word ‘Gotti’, struck a familiar chord with people in the villages, for different sections of people again, the word triggered different meanings, conjured up different images. Traditionally, according to many, men attended the Gotti more often than women and to a large extent also appear to have dominated the forum. In the initial stages of mobilizing people to the Gotti therefore, it was difficult to get women to come to the Gotti. In some villages, attempts were made to hold the Gotti at a place and time convenient for the women to enable greater participation. In some villages where women took part in the Gotti, there was reluctance on their part to express their views on several issues in the presence of men. These experiences led to the initiation of an intensive action research and documentation process on gender issues in the area, a series of gender-sensitization processes at various levels and campaigns to highlight gender discriminatory practices in the adivasi community. Several rounds of intensive discussions with women in the villages led to the need for creating an alternative space for the women in the form of “Women’s Gotti”, in many villages to enable them to come together and discuss issues of concern to their lives. What was perhaps most central to the process of reviving the Gotti was not its revival alone but significantly its redefinition,
expansion and democratization as a forum enabling different sections of the adivasi community to come together to discuss their issues. Given that the revival of Gotti itself came importantly at a time when the tribal society in the area was witnessing rapid transformation on all fronts, the process of mobilizing Women to the Gotti and strengthening this forum was never a smooth process but fraught with several problems and questions. For the women involved, initial concerns were around deciding how often, where and when to meet, deciding their own agenda and issues for discussion, confronting initial resistance and interference from men in the villages, balancing their personal lives and their farming activities and working through their own differences to evolve suitable strategies to address issues affecting their lives and survival as women in the area. An important and related issue during the initial formation of women’s Gotti was women’s demands for small loans and credit in many villages, given that many of the women were part of other government initiated programmaes like the DWCRA and which provided such credit. The challenges for us as a facilitating NGO was to constantly search for creative ways to strengthen the gotti, sustain women’s mobilization process and their interest in the forum, supporting them in holding the collective together, providing continuous inputs to build women’s awareness and information base, even while responding to their economic demands for interventions to improve their highly vulnerable livelihood base. The challenge at the same time was to balance what we essentially believed was a process-based or learning-based approach to empowerment while also negotiating continuous pressures from external donors oriented towards a project-based approach, demanding identifiable impact indicators in a given time frame. Scaling up our work in the same geographical area without diluting the quality of processes again presented innumerable problems.

My involvement in all the above processes during my six years of work experience with Yakshi was an extremely enriching period. However, experiences in “facilitating empowerment processes” for women also necessitated a need though to rethink the idea of empowerment and several questions and missing links that the actual translation of this idea into concrete practice raised for me. This research project itself is both an extension and product of this critical reflection on many of the issues and questions related to the
process of women’s empowerment. At a related level, this research is also prompted by the macro context in Andhra Pradesh, where the idea of organizing women into “Self-Help Groups”, (SHGs), savings and thrift, DWCRA etc) had gained rapid momentum during this time and was being seen by many as a primary strategy to empowering women.

2. Framing the Research Problem

In the past two decades or so, the term ‘Empowerment’ has gained rapid currency in development thinking and practice, particularly with reference to women. While many, ranging from donors, policy makers, non-government organizations (NGO’s), development practitioners etc widely and often uncritically use the term, it has been rarely defined. The term has no fixed or authoritative definition, but is frequently used to describe a process wherein the powerless or disempowered gain a greater share of control over resources and decision-making. Given the fact that women are the most marginalized and disempowered of the oppressed classes, the term women’s empowerment has come to be associated with their struggle for equality and social justice.

The resurgence of the women’s movement worldwide combined with research and scholarship on women brought in new categories into the development field. Gender as an analytical category became central to examining inequalities between men and women and an important basis for gender-sensitive planning and policy making. This process was paralleled by shifts in the use of terms like ‘upliftment of women’ and ‘women’s development’, and more recently replaced by ‘empowerment of women’ in the development context. However the often-uncritical use of the term empowerment disguises a problematic concept. Quite central to the understanding of the meaning of empowerment is in the context of its root concept power, itself an often-disputed concept.

Despite its widespread use by many, there are very few definitions of empowerment with a focus on development. The definitions of empowerment used in education, counseling
and social work despite being based on work in the industrialized societies are all broadly similar to Freire’s concept of ‘Conscientization’, which centers on individuals being ‘subjects’ in their own lives and developing a ‘Critical Consciousness’— that is an understanding of their reality and social environment that leads to action to transform it. Feminist interpretations of power lead to a still broader understanding of empowerment, since they go beyond formal and institutional definitions of power and incorporate the idea of ‘the personal as political’.

In the context of rural development in India along with the increasing use of the term in recent times, have come redefined notions of practices and strategies to address poor and marginalized women in different contexts. There have been no attempts so far though, to critically examine the conceptual basis or the emerging visions and strategies for women’s empowerment, particularly in the broader context and process of rapid globalization. Empowerment in recent times has also come to share much in common with other concepts used by development practitioners such as ‘Participation’, ‘Capacity-building’, ‘Institutional Development’, ‘Equity’ and ‘Sustainability’. There appears to be a strong tendency though to use these concepts in a way that edits out the troublesome notions of power and the distribution of power, which precisely shape the lives of the poor and marginalized women.

For several reasons (described in the previous chapter-II), Andhra Pradesh was an interesting context for a critical examination of several conceptual issues, policies and practices surrounding women’s empowerment. As part of the larger liberalization project, ushered in by the Indian government, Andhra Pradesh became the First State in 1997 to undertake a comprehensive Economic Restructuring Programme being supported by the World Bank. The government sees women’s empowerment as one of the main strategies to tackle poverty in the State and brought out a ‘Policy and Strategy Paper on Women’s Empowerment’, as part of its larger plan to achieve economic growth in the next twenty years under its ‘Vision 2020’ policy guidelines.
During the past decade in Andhra Pradesh, several development programmes and externally funded projects have been initiated both by government and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) with a stated objective of women’s empowerment in their vision documents. While the specificity of the local context appears to be central in informing the nature and forms of different strategies taken up for women’s empowerment, organization of Women into village level collectives through ‘Self-Help’ or Thrift and Savings Groups was a key feature in these various initiatives.

Through a review of key theoretical debates and primary field studies carried out in Andhra Pradesh in South India, this research was an attempt to analyze how empowerment strategies for women are being negotiated in rapidly changing and diverse socio-economic contexts. In seeking to track the relationship between ways of thinking and doing, this research aimed to subject both the content of these empowerment claims by different actors (Government, NGO’s, CBO’s) and the nature of varying strategies to translate these ideas into practice to critical enquiry. Given that the mobilization of women in rural areas into village-level Women collectives (such as SHGs and other groups etc) featured as a significant strategy in almost all government and NGO interventions, these collectives as “vehicles for women’s empowerment”, were the central and most critical sites of analysis in this research process. This research was aimed at making the insights gained as widely available as possible to a variety of individuals, groups and institutions interested in the subject. To this extent, this research process and the findings were envisaged as an instrument of advocacy.

3. Feminist Research and the Need for Interweaving Location and Relevance into Praxis

Conventional research in social sciences has historically been influenced by the prescriptions of the “scientific method”. This has meant adherence to the tenets of the physical sciences which privileges objective knowledge over the subjective, the emphasis of knowledge on claiming one absolute truth and the denial of individual differences, the conditions of knowledge production, attributes and worldviews of the producer. The
emergence of well developed critiques within the social science disciplines has over time challenged the validity of “scientific methods”, with their emphasis on objectivity. Over the last three decades, feminist inquirers have raised fundamental challenges to the ways social science has analyzed women, men and social life. From the beginning, issues about method, methodology and epistemology have been intertwined with discussions of how best to correct the partial and distorted accounts in traditional analyses. Feminist researchers have argued that traditional theories have been applied in ways that make it difficult to understand women’s participation in social life, or to understand men’s activities as gendered (vs. as representing ‘the human’). Some have argued that it is not by looking at research methods that one will be able to identify the distinctive features of the best of feminist research (Harding, 1987). It is by asking about the feminist history the kind of questions Thomas Kuhn posed about the history of science that directs one to identify the characteristics that distinguish the most illuminating examples of feminist research. Three such features that Harding suggests are using women’s experiences as a basis for building new empirical and theoretical resources, making women the goal of social sciences in terms of providing for women explanations of the social phenomena that they want and need and thirdly locating the researcher in the same critical plane as the overt subject matter. It is features such as these and not a feminist method which are responsible for producing the best of the new feminist research and scholarship. They can be thought of as methodological features because they show us how to apply the general structure of scientific theory to research on women and gender as well as epistemological ones because they imply theories of knowledge different from the traditional ones (ibid, 1987). Various feminist critiques have also brought to the fore the importance of contextualisation or the rooting, of all knowledge and have also established the indisputable place of differences in the construction of theory. Feminist social scientists have in particular argued for the validity of multiple knowledge’s and feminist epistemologies and have enabled the disciplines to further introspect about their processes of knowledge creation, compelling them to acknowledge their androcentrism, or male centeredness (Maynard, M and Purvis, J. 1994). In addition to being socially constructed, feminists have drawn attention to the fact that all knowledge has historically reflected the dominant ideology, serving the interests of the powerful, largely men.
Women’s experiences and perspectives have been excluded from the creation of knowledge. Feminist research has sought to transform knowledge by reinstating within mainstream academic discourse women’s experiences and perspectives and in the process reshaping the mainstream rather than getting subsumed within the male character of the mainstream (Hekman 1990).

As processes and effects of globalization and neo-liberalism have become central to the agendas of progressive academics, questions surrounding critical praxis, reflexive activism and relevant theory have acquired renewed momentum and urgency. For at least two decades now feminist theorists from various philosophical locations have reflected on the relationships between decolonization, anti-capitalist critiques, oppositional practices and emancipatory education. Several excellent examples have emerged of the ways in which ethics and the politics of solidarity can be enacted on the ground and across borders (Alexander and Mohanty 1997; Mohanty 2003). These engagements and interventions have clearly established the importance of interweaving theory and praxis in feminist work. At the same time, however, the persistence of the traditional compartmentalization of theory and methodology has often prevented academics from working across borders from engaging more centrally with theory as praxis and from focusing more explicitly on the questions of socio-political relevance in knowledge production (Moss 2002). The terms ‘theory’, ‘praxis’ and ‘methodology’ here are used in the sense used by Pamela Moss who defines “theory” as “a combination of both conceptualizations of phenomena and an explanation of how phenomena work, exist or articulate; “ for her praxis is a “politically active way to live in the world” while feminist methodology is “about the approach to research, including the conventional aspects of research – the design, the data collection, the analysis and the circulation of information – and the lesser acknowledged aspects of research – relationships among people involved in the research process, the actual conduct of the research, and process through which the research comes to be undertaken and completed” (ibid, 2002). Peake and Trotz explicitly pose the question of how Third World and the First World women can work together ‘in ways that are authorized by dialogue with (Third World subjects) and not just First World audiences’ (Peake and Trotz 2001). Reflexive questioning of
ourselves and of the techniques we use must be accompanied by a continued interrogation of how our supposedly improved representational strategies might be constitutiong new silences. Such an interrogation requires that we tap into the tremendous potential of activism and produce critical analyses based on local feminist praxis (Peake and Trotz, 1999; 2001)

4. Using Grounded Theory as a Methodology

There are different types of qualitative research like ethnography, the phenomenological approach, life histories, conversational analysis and grounded theory approach. Each of these approaches is meaningful in terms of its use in studying various issues and is used varyingly by researchers of different disciplines. One of the major controversies and questions concerning qualitative research pertains to the question of approach such as how much interpretation should there be of the data? Some researchers believe that data should not be analyzed per se but rather the researchers’ task is to gather and present that data as honestly as possible without his or her biases intruding upon the data. Other qualitative researchers are concerned with accurate description while doing their analysis and presenting their findings. There are different analytic or interpretative procedures that are used in qualitative research which include techniques for conceptualizing data. This process, called coding varies, based on the experience and training of the researcher (Becker, 1986; Lofland, 1971; Charmaz, 1983; Miles and Huberman, 1994). Other procedures such as non-statistical or theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Schatzman and Strauss, 1973) also form part of the qualitative research process. There are still other writers who are concerned with building theory who believe that the development of theoretically informed interpretations is the most powerful way to bring reality to light (Blumer, 1969; Diesing, 1971; Glaser, 1978).

The choice of the Grounded theory approach for conducting this research has been guided largely in keeping with feminist research traditions and the subject matter of this study. Given the fact that this research project engages with questions of women’s empowerment in the context of rural development, the fundamental premise here is that
‘woman’ is a valid and necessary category of analysis in this research. The use of grounded theory here is aimed at building a theory that is grounded in the realities, experiences, perspectives and subjective positions of women through this research. It is about going into the field and understanding the nature of experiences of various actors as they continually evolve and the active role of persons, especially women, in shaping the world’s they live in. The emphasis here is on process and change, the variability and complexity of experiences in varying contexts.

“A grounded theory is one that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon” (Strauss and Corbin 1990: 23). This means that in grounded theory approach, data collection, analysis and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other. The objective therefore then is not to begin with a theory, and then prove it. It is rather about beginning with an area of study and allowing what is relevant to that area to emerge. As a qualitative research approach, grounded theory offers the researcher to interweave her own experiences, feelings and interactions with people and “soft data” with facts and “hard” data. From the viewpoint of this research process, the use of grounded theory was about recognizing and accounting for the varied experiences of actors (both women and men) from multiple positions (varying across caste, class, ethnicity and other factors) and attempting to give a legitimate place to the same in the process of building a theory around empowerment as a process. Theory itself then is derived from experiences analytically entered into by the inquiring researcher, continually subject to revision in the light of that experience, thus reflexive and self-reflexive and accessible to everyone. Theory building here is also not merely to explain the phenomenon but more importantly about using the outcomes to formulate and outline a framework for future action.

The choice of research methodology in this research has been primarily guided by the nature of the research problem under study. My training in sociology and my previous experience of using qualitative methods for data collection and analysis also influenced this choice. The subject matter of the current research around questions of women’s
empowerment necessitated the use of qualitative research approaches that would effectively help uncover and understand the phenomenon in depth and bring out previously unknown aspects in the process of this research. The research also had more to do with ideas, experiences, perceptions, feelings, emotions, interactions and relationships of individuals, organizations and groups of people – all of which largely fall in the realm of the “subjective” that necessitated an approach, suitably sensitive to studying the same. A major component of the qualitative research methodology adopted in the study comprised of field data gathered through various tools such as in-depth interviews, group discussions with women and case studies and narratives using open-ended questionnaires. The coding procedures which were used for analyzing, interpreting and conceptualizing data and building relationships amongst various categories of data collected from the field was another major component of the methodology here. A third major component involved writing up the research findings from the data collected and analyzed that were both pertinent and relevant to the phenomenon under study.

5. The Research Process

This research process can be broadly divided into two distinct phases- the preparatory phase and the phase involving data collection, analysis and writing up the findings. The methodological steps as well as issues and challenges involved in each phase are described here in detail.

i) The preparatory Phase : Bringing the Research Problem into an Institutional Space

As mentioned earlier, the choice of the research problem itself was largely shaped by my experiences of working with an NGO for several years. In the context of my experiences of facilitating empowerment processes for women in the tribal context, a critical reexamination and reflection on these processes necessitated a need to step out of the organizational context of the NGO. This meant a break from “regular responsibilities” of being a paid staff in the organization in order to allow both the time and space required
for serious reflection on the research problem. The decision to bring the research problem into an institutional space of the University was prompted by several factors. Some major considerations here were - bringing in rigor into the process of the research through regular inputs and support from a regular research advisor/supervisor, the need for focused background reading and review of existing literature on the subject as well as access to library facilities and financial support for sustaining the research process that an institution like a university provides. More importantly, the need for feeding the outcomes of this research into academic debates seemed important in a context where there appeared to be a sharp divide between the academic and NGO worlds, with mainstream academic research being seen as far removed from the realities on ground by the latter. Equally important, a space in the University through a formal PhD registration meant the regular guidance and support from a research supervisor throughout the process of conducting the research. The presence of a supervisor “as an anchor and sounding board” is critical in a research situation where the researcher is constantly at the risk of getting “isolated in one’s research problem”, and feels the need to constantly share observations, experiences and findings at every stage of the research process. The choice of both my research supervisor and the Center for Regional Studies, the department (housed in the School of Social sciences), where I registered for this research has had an important bearing on this research. The interdisciplinary nature of the department offered wide scope and space for looking at the nature of questions that I was engaging through this research.

Having a research supervisor, who was both a friend, a co-traveler in the women’s movement, and was also familiar with the context and subject of this research, was of immense help in this research. Our regular interactions, several stimulating discussions and sharing perspectives on field data and secondary literature, the openness to new ideas, inducing the required discipline without imposing it, setting the scope of this study which often ran the risk of becoming unwieldy, the space for sharing personal problems, frustrations and concerns, especially in a non-hierarchical setting were all critical in shaping every stage of this research. In addition, regular sharing of insights from the field
with friends and acquaintances working in the broader arena of the rural development sector also helped in gaining very useful feedback.

ii) Review of Secondary Literature

A review and analysis of available secondary data on different aspects of women’s empowerment was carried out in the initial period of the study. This involved reviewing a whole range of secondary literature – academic writings on the subject by various researchers in the form of edited books, journals, newspapers, magazines, official policy documents and evaluation reports and annual reports of government and NGO’s wherever relevant. There was not much literature with a focus on theorizing questions of women’s empowerment, especially in the development context, that was directly accessible. One had to therefore read around, critically review and analyze through select writings and other key theoretical debates and frameworks on gender and development, questions of participation in development etc to identify gaps in the understanding and clarifying important variables for the study. The initial readings and arguments were consolidated around some broad areas and themes. While one did not want to enter the field with an entire list of concepts and relationships, some of these turned up over and over again in the literature and appeared to be significant. It seemed important then to take these to the field to look for evidence of whether or not they applied to the situation under study and the form that they took in this study. To this extent, a review of existing literature on the subject, combined with my own previous experiences in the field served to enhance theoretical sensitivity around key concepts and ideas that might be potentially relevant to my own study. The first few rounds of fieldwork also helped in directing further reading on fresh areas and topics. Apart from serving the purpose of a secondary source of data and as supplementary validation, the secondary research study helped in stimulating key questions for field research and in guiding a non-statistical, theoretical sampling for carrying out primary research. As an initial step, from a review of secondary literature, an attempt was made to link ideas and practice, in the form of a framework (elaborated in a later section here) with a view to critically reexamining the same and conceptualizing new and relevant categories in the light of findings, which emerged out
of primary field research. In this sense, the fieldwork itself was not constrained by adherence to any previously developed theoretical formulation, but allowed “an emergent understanding on empowerment” grounded in the field realities, situations and contexts that were studied.

iii) Planning Primary Field Research

This included several important steps that are described in detail.

a) Identifying suitable organizations for field research

The review of secondary literature and discussions with several people (including research supervisor), combined with the researchers own previous experiences helped in the identification of different organizations involved in mediating a range of strategies and processes related to women’s empowerment within Andhra Pradesh. The initial idea was to make a comparative study of different interventions and experiences aimed at empowering rural women across the 3 broad regions within the State - Telangana, Rayalaseema and Coastal Andhra. However, the decision to focus on the Telangana region was made, given the time and resources available for this research and more importantly the need to retain focus on the questions central to this research to ensure deeper insights and greater generalization possible from within the same region. The criteria for selection of field sites/organizations to collaborate in the primary field research was made based on the following criteria

- Type of organization (NGO, NGO-CBO collaboration, Government, Semi-Govt collaborating with government)
- Different kinds of strategies/approaches adopted for women’s empowerment.
- Involvement in facilitating women’s empowerment processes for a period of at least 6-8 years, that would lend some of the key processes open to the purposes of this study.
A list of key organizations was drawn up for the region, broadly fitting the above criteria and a copy of the research proposal was sent to these organizations. The initial response was not very encouraging from many organizations. While many did not respond to the research proposal, several others tended to be suspicious about the purpose, especially given their familiarity with my work experience in an NGO and my ideological orientation “as a feminist”. Many appeared to have apprehensions about subjecting their work to a “critical feminist lens” as they saw it. However, some of the organizations responded favorably and sought further clarifications about the research. Based on initial response from some organizations, a preliminary field visit to their work areas was undertaken. This was combined with some discussions with the staff and reading of background documents and reports related to their work. These were then used as a basis for selection of 4 different field sites and institutions –

- **Andhra Pradesh Mahila Samata Society (APMSS)** - A Semi/quasi-government organization involved in facilitating education and awareness building processes for empowering rural women. APMSS began its work during the early 1990’s primarily in Mahabubnagar and Medak districts in the Telangana region and gradually scaled up its work to other districts in Andhra Pradesh.

- **REEDS (Rural Environment, Education and Development Society)** - a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) which began its work during the early 1990’s and has been involved in formation of women’s self-help groups (SHGs) for promoting thrift and credit and other development activities in the North-eastern side of Mahabubnagar district. The NGO has been working towards federating the SHGs into village-level organizations of women (VO’s) and also further at the mandal level unit (mandal mahila samakhya’s) towards empowering them.

- **District Rural Development Agency (DRDA), Rangareddy district** - the apex Government agency involved in the conception, planning and implementation of the DWCRA programme (Development of Women Child in Rural Areas) all over the State, using the SHG approach. The DWCRA aims to empower rural women through a combination of thrift and credit activities, livelihood promotion, awareness building and capacity building processes.
Swayam Krishi Sangam (SKS) – a Micro-finance Institution involved in extending credit and loan interventions aimed at poverty alleviation and empowerment of women in Medak district of Andhra Pradesh

However, following preliminary field visits to the field sites, 2 of the above organizations – the DRDA intervention in Ranga Reddy district and Swayam Krishi Sangam were replaced by 2 other organizations for various reasons. After initial field visits, the NGO (SKS) was keen to conduct an impact evaluation of their work mandated by their external donors and felt that accommodating a longer period of research study would pose constraints to their regular work. The earlier choice of SKS was replaced by another organization CDF (Cooperative Development Foundation), which has been involved in the formation of Women’s thrift and Credit Cooperatives and Dairy cooperatives in Warangal and Karimnagar Districts of A.P. using a cooperative model or principle for organizing women and men in the villages.

Preliminary field visits to Mahbubnagar district, where 2 of the above selected organizations (APMSS and REEDS) were working revealed that women in almost all the villages were also part of SHG’s and DWCRA groups organized by the DRDA in the district, which was facilitating different programmes, including a major bilateral supported poverty alleviation initiative, called “Velugu” (meaning Light in Telugu) in the district. Therefore, for purposes of comparison within the same geographical area (district) and the need to play for greater control, the choice of studying the DRDA initiatives in Ranga Reddy district was replaced by the same organization in Mahbubnagar district.

All the four Organizations selected for intensive field research were distinct for their thinking and ideas related to women’s empowerment as well as their different strategies for empowering rural women ranging from economic interventions of thrift and credit, integrated rural development, formation of women’s cooperatives, natural resource management, women’s participation in panchayats, awareness building and conscientisation to research, training and capacity building support activities.
b) **Criteria for selection of villages for field study**

To begin with, initial discussions about the research process and its aims with staff of the organizations combined with a reading of secondary documents (annual reports/progress reports) formed a useful starting point. During the first 2 visits to the field areas of the study organizations (June & July 2002), the focus was on understanding the evolution of their work with women over time in terms of key phases and processes, shifts in perspectives, expansion and growth in activities, organizational arrangements for implementation of various programmes and activities. In addition, preliminary field visits were undertaken to several villages in the work areas. While the choice of villages was not based on any preconceived theoretical framework, it was largely guided by sensitivity to the findings and observations emerging from initial rounds of field visits. Based on observations from these field visits and discussions with women members of various collectives and field staff of the four organizations, selection of specific villages for this study was done using the following criteria.

- Caste and class composition of the village
- Age/ number of years in existence of the women’s collective (locally known as sanghams, SHGs)
- Diversity of issues taken up and addressed by the sangham
- Diversity of activities and interventions involving the women’s collectives (such as Natural Resource Management, health, education, awareness building, capacity building processes, thrift and credit, livelihood promotion etc)
- Membership of sangham women in other groups and committees (DWCRA, SHG, watershed, forestry, Velugu etc)
- Training and Capacity building, transfer of skills and information to women

Even while using the above criteria for selection of villages in all the case study organizations, the context specificity of each field area and case study required the development of certain additional criteria, which are elaborated further in the subsequent chapter (Chapter IV) covering details of each case study organization. A total number of
20 villages, 4 in REEDS and 8 each in APMSS and CDF work areas were selected for intensive field study. For studying the DRDA-DWCRA programme in Mahbubnagar district, the same 12 villages in REEDS and APMSS were used for data collection, given women’s membership in the DWCRA groups apart from their membership in the sanghams/collectives promoted by the above organizations. The socio-economic details and profile of the each of the 20 villages selected for the study are again described in detail in the next chapter IV.

c) Guiding Questions for Data Collection

Relevant questions were identified through several processes that included review of secondary literature (as mentioned earlier), initial discussions with staff of study organisations and preliminary visits to field areas.

Given the centrality of the sangham or the collective to the process of women’s empowerment and a nodal point around which all the other interventions facilitated by the study organizations revolved, it formed a major focus of this research. The growth and evolution of the collective over time is placed against the above background of key shifts in perspectives and strategies taken up by the mediating organizations (NGO, GO), in the process of examining the implications for women’s empowerment. The research also analyzed empowerment outcomes for women as against the original vision and stated objectives of all the case study organizations.

A checklist of open-ended, key questions was used across all the study villages with the women’s groups. Since the idea of process was central to women’s empowerment, at the level of the village sanghams, the focus of the key questions was on understanding women’s experiences along the following.

- Processes of Sangham formation (key catalytic events and experiences that bought women together)
Women’s understanding of issues and strategies used in addressing issues (including confronting power structures at different levels)

Identification of issues by the women’s groups, defining priorities

Processes of defining the content and pace of their learning (acquiring new skills, capacities, information) and its use in addressing issues by the Sangha’s as well as by the women in their lives

Dynamics and interaction of Caste, class and gender identities of women in the sangham

Processes of understanding and negotiating power, decision-making and leadership within and outside the sangham

Women’s understanding of development and participation in development programmes (DWCRA, SHG, Velugu)

Participation in electoral politics

Women’s perceptions on the sangham as a vehicle for empowerment

It is however important to emphasize here that the key guiding questions were not structured in any manner while being posed to the women members in the sanghas. The selection and use of the questions were more in terms of collecting data that is theoretically relevant for this research

d) Tools/methods for data collection

A Theoretical sampling methodology was adopted for the field study based on concepts that are relevant to this research. The aim of using this methodology was to sample events, incidents, and so forth during the course of field work that are indicative of categories, analyzing their meaning and dimensions in an attempt to develop and conceptually relate them. A combination of semi-structured interviews with sangha women, individual case studies and focus group discussions and participant observation methods were used for collection of different kinds of data that best captured the above purpose. Interviews and discussions were also held with the key staff and programme directors or head of the above organizations (government and NGOs).
The study also focused on understanding the structure, role, nature of issues taken up and
the sphere of influence of the mandal samakhya (federation of women sanghams) in the
process of women’s empowerment. This was done through participation in mandal
samakhya meetings which took place on a specified day every month in each of the case
study organisations. At a second and closely related level, the research also focused on
the organizational structure of the project at the district level, role of different staff and
extension workers (locally known as Karyakartha), who form a critical interface
between the sangham and the organization. Here, individual discussions were held with
the key staff. Traveling with them during their field visits to villages also helped in
understanding their role in the villages, relationship with sangham women, nature of
engagement with issues etc. My stay with the Karyakartha in villages, sometimes in
their houses as well as participation in staff review meetings at district level also helped
in gaining further insights into the changing nature of their roles within the project, their
achievements, frustrations, perceptions of the sangham and perspectives on different
issues. Collection of secondary data from census records, district handbooks compiled by
the Chief Planning Officers (CPO) at the district level etc on key socio-economic
indicators (land ownership, caste-class composition, population, literacy, sex ratio
indices, etc) for the study villages was another component of the study. For further
insights on development programmes aimed at women like DWCRA, SHGs, Velugu etc.,
discussions were held with key functionaries of the district administration like the Project
Director of DRDA in the district and State level.

5) Conducting Field Research: Some Issues and challenges

Fieldwork to different sites was undertaken in such a manner as to make greater
interpretation and analysis from data generated possible. A total number of 5-6 field visits
were made to each of the women sanghams in all the 20 study villages for intensive
study. The field level staff or village and mandal karyakartha of the study organizations
accompanied me on most of these visits. On some instances, the visits were made alone,
once familiarity was established with the women in the groups. It was not possible to
meet all sangham members during all visits, since women were busy with different
activities at various points of time. A deliberate seasonality dimension was built into the study to enable an in depth understanding of how different issues were taken up by the sangham at different points of time. Field visits were therefore spread over 2 broad time frames - July-October (monsoon season) and January-May (summer season).

Field research was done over an extended period of time in two broad phases during the period 2003-06. In all villages, group discussions with sangham women were conducted along the set of guiding questions mentioned above aimed broadly at understanding some of the key processes related to empowerment. Further questions were probed with each sangha, depending on the nature of the responses and content of the discussions. In addition, some in-depth interviews in the form of case studies were conducted with individual women in the sangham to gain further insights and to illustrate some processes in greater depth. Group discussions were held mostly during the night when women were able to spare more time. Depending on women’s time, the discussions lasted roughly for a period of 1-3 hrs during each visit.

Conducting field research was not easy and was fraught with methodological challenges and issues at various levels.

i) The Challenge of Conducting Focus Group Discussions

One of the main challenges was conducting focus group discussions with women members of the sangha’s or collectives in all the four study organizations. The purpose of organizing the focus group discussions was to explore women’s perceptions and views on some of the key processes such as the formation and evolution of the sangha, the changing role and form of the sangha over time, women’s experiences of collectively being able to address issues through the sangha, perceptions of the sangha’s success and failure and reasons for the same etc. This necessitated extended discussions with the same group of women, who have been members of the sangha since its formation and journey over a period of time. In practice however, getting the same group of women together for discussions proved to be difficult since many of them were busy with various household
and farm related works or other personal commitments like weddings, celebrations or death of family members in some cases during the time of field visits. To a large extent, the timing of the field visits was fixed in prior consultation with some of the group members and discussions were held during the night when women were relatively free. In most of the study villages, especially in Mahbubnagar district, many households regularly migrate out of the villages in search of work during the summer months seeking some income from alternative livelihood sources. In most cases, women and children also migrated out along with men from the households. In the process of using focus group discussions, one was forced to contend with the larger realities of women’s lives and their everyday struggles for survival, work and wages which impinged on the levels of their participation and engagement with the activities of the sangha. Many times, it was a case of finding and losing members of the focus group which in turn posed a methodological challenge. Focus groups discussions are often used as a methodology in social science research to explore a specific set of issues such as people’s views and experiences of contraception, drinking, nutrition, mental illness etc. The group is ‘focused’ in the sense that it involves some kind of collective activity or debating a particular set of questions (Kitzinger, 1994). Crucially, focus groups are distinguished from the broader category of group interviews by ‘the explicit use of the group interaction’ as research data (Merton et al. 1990 and Morgan 1988). However, the actual challenges and experiences in using focus group as a method during data collection is rarely acknowledged in most research writings. The experiences during this research compelled a re-examination of using methods like focus group discussions for data collection, their appropriateness and feasibility in certain situations and more importantly the need for an honest account of the limitations in using the method in the field context. Field experiences also called for a certain flexibility and creativity in the use of the method to overcome the limitations. For example, in cases where it was difficult to meet the same members of the group for extended discussions, the purpose of the study and the importance of the presence of all women members in the discussions was shared right at the outset with the group. Based on the time and work schedules of the group members, the date, time and duration of each session were fixed with the group. In some cases, the entire process of data collection was done in two longer sessions since some of the women could not be present
for several group discussions. Perhaps the most positive aspect of the focus group discussions was that it enabled an insight into differences between group participants in terms of their class, caste, and land holding patterns. The group discussions also facilitated a great variety of communication from the participants, tapping into a wide range and form of understanding on several issues. The process also helped in identifying group norms, by providing insights into the operation of group/social processes in the articulation of knowledge and information (for example through the examination of what information is censored or muted within the group).

The group discussions also encouraged open conversation amongst women participants about often private and embarrassing subjects, enabling them to share ideas and experiences and even express their disagreements openly on many occasions. The arguments and conflicts between women and often open questioning amongst themselves on various issues during discussions also served to highlight varying beliefs and underlying assumptions related to the same. These are discussed in greater detail in the more detailed analysis of research findings (see Chapter V). The group discussions in many ways revealed dimensions of women’s understanding about their own lives and the larger processes and challenges to their empowerment that often remain untapped by the more conventional one-to-one interview schedule or questionnaire methods.

ii) Conducting In-depth-Interviews: The challenge of individual women versus the collective

A related challenge during data collection was conducting in-depth interviews with individual women members of the sanghas and other groups in order to understand some of the experiences and processes in greater detail. This process bought in the larger dynamics of the individual in relation to the group quite sharply in focus. In some groups, women participants had no problems with some members of the group being chosen for more detailed individual interviews often even prompting and suggesting the names of women who could provide more information. At other times, women were often suspicious of the researchers’ motives and intentions in requesting for detailed interviews with
specific members of the group. Further understanding of this dynamics revealed that the apprehensions stemmed from the possibility of the individual women being favored for special benefits like loans or selection for benefits in development schemes as a result of the interviews. Given these experiences, specific efforts were made to clarify to all the women members of the group that the outcomes of the research were not aimed at designing any developmental programmes to benefit specific or individual women in the groups. It was also important to clarify to the women respondents in this research about my academic affiliation to the university and not to any government department or non-governmental organization. While compelling a critical reflection on the methods used for data collection, these experiences more importantly led to a re-examination of my own biases and assumptions as a researcher about the sangha or the collective as a cohesive space where women pursued common interests.

iii) The Researcher-Researched Relationship

Any research claiming to be feminist cannot have the researcher assuming the role of an expert. The central task of a researcher here is to position women as legitimate bearers of knowledge. However, this task could not be accomplished without the research process itself being designed to ensure a high degree of comfort for women respondents to feel at ease. Therefore, the challenge was to use a combination of qualitative research methods like focus group discussions, individual case studies, life histories and participant observation techniques etc in a flexible and non-prescriptive manner even while being alert to the inherent deficiencies of each of these methods. The important challenge was to deal with the implicit hierarchy between the researcher and the researched arising from the authority vested with the interviewer. The hierarchical dimension of the researcher-researched interactions has been discussed in feminist literature. Janet Finch (1984) asserts that the identification of the women with the women interviewer is fundamental to women’s comfort in the interview situation. This identification arises out of the fact that both parties share a subordinate structural position by virtue of their gender. However, in most situations, the gender dimension often interlocks with other dimensions of inequality like class, caste, age, education and location of the researcher which again has
a bearing on the research process. For feminist research, the woman-to-woman interaction in a research context is not only a methodological but also a political issue.

One of the key concerns related to the researcher-researched hierarchy arising out of this research was the selection of the place or setting for conducting the group discussions as well as individual interviews with women members of the sangha’s. On many occasions, while the facilitating organizations were keen to organize meetings with the women in their offices or in other places decided by them, the need to hold the discussions in the villages where women lived and worked was emphasized. On almost all occasions, the discussions were held in a designated place like the sangha’s office or a specific location in the village where the women regularly held their weekly or monthly meetings. In case of individual interviews, the same were held at the respondents’ house or a location decided by them where they felt comfortable to interact and talk. A second important concern was to make the interview process as non-directive as possible in order to respect the women respondents as well as encourage free sharing of ideas. Efforts were made to clarify and share the purpose and objectives of the research project at the outset itself to address the implicit hierarchy in the research process. One also tried to ensure that an atmosphere of cordiality and respect for the respondents was created. In individual interviews and group discussions, most of the initial discussions and questions dealt with more general issues such as the objectives and process of sangha’s formation, number of members, issues addressed by the sangha, women’s perceptions of education, public facilities, livelihood related issues etc. Once a certain level of familiarity and comfort was established, the conversations moved to more personal questions such as sexuality, relationships with male members of the household, reproductive choices etc. On several occasions, women also asked me a great number of questions like why was I not yet married? Why was I traveling alone and working so far away from my home and family? questions about my caste, etc. As a researcher, I realized that it was important for me to invest my own personal identity in the relationship and be as honest in answering these questions to make the interactions as non-hierarchical as possible. In some cases women also had questions and apprehensions about what purposes the data would be used for and it was again important to assure them about the confidentiality of the data collected and
emphasize that it would not be used against the interest of the women. The draft report of the discussions and interviews were shared with most of the sangha’s and almost all individual women respondents of the one-to-one interviews, by reading it out to the women. Corrections and changes were made based on feedback from the women and wherever women felt further clarifications were necessary, the same were added. In many cases, women also remarked that “you really have understood and written about my life there”, “for the first time, somebody has taken the effort to understand and write about our problems and experiences. Others should know about what it is to be born and live as women in this society”. One of the ways to address the researcher-researched relationship was to be accountable to the women respondents and represent their views and experiences as honestly as possible. It was also important to share the findings from the research with them to make the process more transparent and empowering in some ways to the women.

6) Interpreting Data and Writing up Research Findings

Alongside the process of data collection in this research process, the biggest challenge was to interpret the data in a meaningful manner. The initial field visits to the study villages helped in gaining a broad understanding of some of the key processes related to women’s empowerment. The data collected at this stage was coded using open coding method and the findings were labeled into broad categories for further analysis and probing during subsequent visits. Another responsibility while analyzing the data was to move beyond simplistic interpretations of the data collected in the form of discussions and interviews. It was important to understand the context and frameworks within which women said what they did or responded in a particular manner to certain questions. In other words, it was important to pay attention to the social and political subtext of women’s lives and realities. In representing the reality, the feminist researcher cannot take the position that her interpretation of the facts is the final word. Making a case for dialogue, discussions and debates is important for the reformulation of knowledge in feminist research. As Lather cites Harding and argues that feminism “must run counter to …. the longing for “one true story”. In avoiding totalizing discourses, feminism must see
itself as permanently partial but less false than androcentric, male centered knowledge (Harding, cited in Lather, 1988).

As the field work for this research progressed further and more data was collected, new categories and concepts for organizing data were discovered. Axial coding procedures were used for linking and relating the data collected in new ways and by making connections and comparisons between various categories and sub-categories. These categories were also continually subjected to further reflection and redefinition during the course of this research. For example, concepts such as ‘awards and rewards and sanctions and punishments’ and ‘membership spaces and citizenship spaces’ (which are discussed in greater detail in Chapter V) were used for categorizing and giving meaning to a whole range of women’s experiences in the process of negotiating their empowerment process in multiple settings. The collection and interpretation of data through the discovery of these categories in turn facilitated a more grounded and nuanced understanding of women’s empowerment that was contingent on women’s realities and experiences and that emerged from the study.

The biggest challenge at the end of this research was to write up the findings into a cohesive thesis. The important question here was what part of all the data collected and interpreted must be written up? How much depth does one go when reporting the research findings? How does one compress the findings drawn from the research into the kind of thesis writing required for the purposes here? The findings from the research were written up while attempting to convey the central analytical message and its components, keeping in mind that the readers or audience of the dissertation will be both from the academic sphere as well as practitioners from the development sector. While the initial draft report of the findings from this research were shared with the field based organizations which were selected for this study, the final report took a much longer time to materialize than expected.

One of the clear limitations of this research is the long gap between completion of field work and the draft report in 2006 and the rather long gap of roughly four years it took to
complete the final report The difficulty in getting the final draft out was primarily ‘letting go’ of the dissertation. Even while accepting that constructing reality in all its completeness is an infinite task, there were nagging questions whether I have managed to get all the relevant details in the dissertation and if I have got them all right? These doubts were stimulated by the almost inevitable discovery of additional details, each time I looked through my field notes. This led to further relocation and rephrasing during rewriting of the draft several times. During the period of the last four years, I had the opportunity to visit the study villages a few times and interact with some members of the women’s groups, staff and heads of the organizations selected collaborating in this research. This enabled the linking of some of the findings emerging from this study to broader developments in the State over the last four years. Eventually, it was important to realize that this dissertation is not the last word on the subject matter of this research but only a small part of the stream of various other theoretical formulations on the subject that have preceded it and will also follow in future. After developing an analytic distance from the dissertation for too long came the realization that it is necessary to prevent one from falling into the trap of aiming for the perfect theses. Letting go of the theses finally has meant allowing oneself to be open to new projects, ideas and new data.