INTRODUCTION

"If India is not to perish, we have to begin with the lowest rung of the ladder, if that was rotten, all work done at the top or the intermediate rungs was bound ultimately to fall" - Mahatma Gandhi

'Women' the marvelous masterpiece of creation, constitute half of the human population. Traditionally, women bear primary responsibility for the well being of their families, which is the nucleus of the society. They play a constructive role in building up the country by contributing their labour in both organized and unorganized sectors. In Indian cult female goddess are given credible devotions. Nevertheless suppression of women is rooted in the very fabric of Indian society - in traditions, in religious doctrine and practices, within the educational and legal systems, and within families. They, in all spheres of life silently or stridently spelt out their suppressed and dehumanized existence. They are systematically denied access to the resources to fulfill their responsibility.

Among women visibly the pyramidal structure of Indian society portrays that Dalit women are in the lowest socio-economic strata of the society. After independence, the constitution of free-India made discrimination based on caste and gender as unlawful. However, in reality the practice of inequity persists in several ways. Dalit women who are the most unfortunate in free India, are recognized as "Dalit among the Dalits or downtrodden among the downtrodden" (Manorama, 1994, p. 159; Nandu, 1998, p.114). Struggles of Dalit women are formidable in a male-
dominated, deprived society. They are looked down as dependent, weak and powerless. Being an oppressed class in the society, Dalit women face the dual core of the struggles for survival and social threats of injustice and inequality. They suffer triple oppression—gender, caste and class (Omvedt, 1995, p.175; Narashiman, 1999, p.23; Manorama, 2000). Let us probe into the triple oppression experienced by Dalit women and comprehend the levels of their dehumanization deeply.

1.1 Gender Disparity

According to Amartya Sen (2001), gender inequality is not one homogenous phenomenon, but a collection of desperate and interlinked problems and the different kinds of gender inequality were displayed in morality, natality, basic facility, special opportunity, professions, ownership and even household matters. Gender disparity includes the discrimination of Dalit women as well.

In comparison with other 27 states and 7 union territories in India, Tamil Nadu (TN) has consistently claimed the superiority of its schemes. While schemes are plenty, the ground reality of women especially rural Dalit women in TN, among clearly identifiable sections, remains a grave area of concern (TSDR, 2000). In the present discussion we shall look into the classification of gender disparity at birth, growth and survival. The data portrays the plight of women in general which also includes Dalit women who are being discriminated on the basis of gender.
1.1.1 Disparity at Birth

In being born as female children and in giving birth to children, women experience grave disparity. While the infant mortality reveals that the right to be born is denied, the maternal mortality speaks of the lack of medical care and attention to women.

1.1.1.1 Infant Mortality

Sex ratio (females per 1000 males) is a simple but very strong index of the long term status of women's welfare. India is one of the few countries where males significantly outnumber females, and this imbalance has increased over time. According to census of India 2001, the sex ratio is 933.

**TABLE 1.1**

**Sex Ratio (1901-2001)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Tamil Nadu</th>
<th>India</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>1044</td>
<td>972</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>1007</td>
<td>946</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>992</td>
<td>941</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>978</td>
<td>930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>977</td>
<td>934</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>974</td>
<td>927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>986</td>
<td>933</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India (1901-2001)

In Tamil Nadu, the sex ratio has been raised to 986 (1991 sex ratio -974). The inter-district variations in TN have been striking. Thoothukudi
has the highest sex ratio of 1049 and Salem has the lowest 929. In Dindigul District, the sex ratio is 986 on par with the ratio of the state.

For the 0-6 years population, Tamil Nadu (TN) figure of 939 is slightly above the Indian average of 927, but there is a general tendency of juvenile sex ratio in TN to decline. The districts of Salem (826), Dharmapuri (878) and Theni (893) have reported very low rates. Salem district has the dubious distinction of having the lowest juvenile sex ratio of 826 among all the districts in our country. Due to female infanticide in TN, thousands of infants are killed every year. In 1998, as per Primary Health Center (PHC) records, 3226 female infants were killed. It is concentrated in a core region of 7 districts namely Salem, Dharmapuri, Theni, Nammakal, Karur, Dindigul and Madurai. The general decline in juvenile sex ratio draws attention to safeguard the future of women.

1.1.1.2 Maternal Mortality

India's maternal mortality rates (MMR) in rural areas are one of the highest in the world. From a global perspective, India accounts for 19 percent of all lives births and 27 percent of all maternal deaths. It is estimated that pregnancy related deaths account for one-quarter of all fatalities among women aged 15 to 29, with well over two-thirds of them considered preventable. For every maternal death in India, an estimated 20 more women suffer from impaired health.
A factor that contributes to India's high maternal mortality rate is the reluctance to seek medical care during pregnancy. It is viewed as a temporary condition that will disappear. The estimates nationwide are that only 40-50 percent of women receive any antenatal care. In TN, it is available only for 81.1 per cent of pregnant mothers (Multi Indicator Survey, 1995) and maternal mortality rate has come down from 376 per 100,000 live births in1992 (India: 453) to 150 in1998. However, MMR was high in the Nilgiris, Perambalur and Sivagangai districts (TSDR, 2000).

1.1.2 Disparity at Growth

As female children grow they are treated differently in getting food and health care. They do not even have educational opportunity as that of their male counterparts.

1.1.2.1 Food and health care

Surviving through a normal life cycle is a resource-poor woman's greatest challenge. Gender disparities in nutrition are evident from infancy to adulthood. In fact, gender has been the most statistically significant determinant of malnutrition among young children and malnutrition is a frequent direct or underlying cause of death among girls below age 5. Girls are breast-fed less frequently and for shorter durations in infancy; in childhood and adulthood, males are fed first and better. A primary way that parents discriminate against their girl children is through neglect during illness. Sometimes the sick, little girls are not taken to the doctor as frequently as are their brothers.
1.1.2.2 Education

Education can pave way for an overall development of individuals and for the society. Female literacy is not only an end itself, but also serves as a catalyst for overall performance in other segments too. General literacy levels of women in TN (64.55 per cent) have been always above the national average (India female literacy: 54.16 per cent).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1.2</th>
<th>Literacy in Tamil Nadu (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year</strong></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>20.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>31.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>39.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>46.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>63.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>73.47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India (1951-2001)

Even though female literacy in TN has shown considerable increase, the gender gap between male and female literacy rates has continued. The need to narrow down the gap is urgent. The inter-district imbalance in literacy levels ranges from 49.10 per cent in Dharmapuri to 85.39 per cent in Kanyakumari.

Desai (1994) asserts that parents’ reluctance to educate daughters has its roots in the situation of women. Foremost is the view that education of girls brings no returns to parents and that their future roles,
being mainly reproductive and perhaps including agricultural labour, require no formal education. Secondly, a large proportion of the roughly 40 million "nonworking" girls who are not in school are kept at home because of responsibilities in housework. Thirdly for the protection of their virginity, when schools are located at a distance, when teachers are male, and when girls are expected to study along with boys, parents are often unwilling to expose their daughters to education.

While considering the literacy of Dalit Women the gap was alarming. The literacy rates of Dalit women were abysmally low at 34.89 per cent (SHBT, 1998). The possible reasons of lack of education for rural Dalit Women are found out to be owing to the lack of guidance, inspiration and want of monetary help from their family members. Moreover humiliating treatment and opposition from the high castes have added hindrance for the education of the Dalit women.

1.1.3 Disparity at Survival

While working for their survival, women are not given equal wages, dignified treatment and their progress is suppressed through violence. However women continue to show their determination by involving in Governance.

1.1.3.1 Work

In rural areas, while the work participation of men had increased from 58.28 per cent in 1991-92 to 60.1 per cent in 1993-94, that of women
increased considerably from 38.50 per cent to 47.8 per cent. While the increase of the work participation of women has to be acknowledged, the types of works undertaken by them bring out clearly their subservient position in Tamil Nadu.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>TABLE 1.3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work Participation (%) in Tamil Nadu</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>58.28</td>
<td>60.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>38.50</td>
<td>47.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>52.78</td>
<td>57.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>13.10</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Statistical Hand Book of Tamil Nadu, 1998)

Women's contribution to agriculture - whether it is subsistence farming or commercial agriculture - when measured in terms of the number of tasks performed and the time spent, is greater than men. The industries namely bidi (hand rolled cigarette) manufacturing (60 per cent), cotton mills (59 per cent), cotton spinning (79 per cent), cashew nut processing (84 per cent) and manufacturing of matches are surely not highly rewarding; some of them even create serious health hazards. Women's work participation mostly goes unrecorded and unrecognized. They work roughly twice as many as many hours as men. Nearly 27 per cent are accounted for by 'unpaid activities' performed by family labour.
Moreover the situation and working condition of rural women in TN requires greater attention and provision.

The contribution of Dalit women to the economic development of our country is significant especially in the agricultural sector. The Work Participation Rate (WPR) of Dalit population is said to be for male 22.25 per cent and for female 25.98 per cent. Dalit women who work as agricultural hired workers regularly face physical abuse and sexual exploitation from the landowners, who normally belong to other castes. They are exploited by the higher caste landlords. They are paid very marginal salary for their hard work in the field for the whole day. Over 70 per cent of Dalits are estimated to be living below the poverty line, as compared to 48 per cent of the general population (Suresh, 1996:p.375).

Other than agriculture, Dalits are confined to occupations like scavenging, removing night soil, curing hides, preparing shoes and removing the bodies of dead animals (Jain, 1997:p.15). The limited educational qualification and poor socio-economic conditions often compel the Dalit women to take up these menial jobs or ill-paid occupations. On the contrary, for the educated often the reserved vacancies were not filled by the State and Central Governments (TH, July 23, 2000:p.3). Unless the Dalit are given access to the gains of the market economy, their prospects for social advancement remain dim (TH, Sep 5, 2000:p.12).
1.1.3.2 Violence

Violence against women and girls is the most pervasive human rights and violation is one of the most crucial social mechanisms by which they are forced into a subordinate position. Fear of violence is a cause of women's lack of participation in activities beyond the home, as well as inside it. In recent years, there has been an alarming rise in atrocities against women in India. Every 26 minutes a woman is molested. Every 34 minutes a rape takes place. Every 42 minutes a sexual harassment occurs. Every 43 minutes a woman is kidnapped. And every 93 minutes a woman is burnt to death over dowry. One-quarter of the reported rapes involve girls under the age of 16 but the vast majority are never reported. Although the penalty is severe, convictions are rare.

The crime pattern reveals that the crimes connected to women are interlinked. Sexual harassment, eve teasing and molestation often end in either murder or suicide. Among 582 instances reported as cases 65 were related to sexual harassment, in which 54 were related to 15-25 years. It reveals that the victims of sexual harassment are mostly adolescent girls and newly married women. As per an official statement in the Parliament in May 2000, of the 8826 women kept in jails all over the country, Tamil Nadu had the highest number of 1658. As the state has large number of cases reported violence against women in TN, one is tend to question the relation and impact of violence on women.
Concerning Dalits, physical violence is a weapon used by the upper castes to suppress. In 1991, total number of criminal cases on caste issues were registered by the government is 21,362. In the same year 1,067 Dalit women were raped, 731 Dalits were murdered, 645 incidents of arson took place, 1990 Dalits were grievously hurt and 17,029 cases of offences against Dalits were registered. In other words, it amounts three Dalit women are raped, two Dalits are murdered and two Dalits house are burnt every day under these circumstances (Thiagaraj, 1993, p.15; file:///A|/Dalit The Black Untouchables of India.htm). Dalit women are also paraded naked when the caste people want to take out their vengeance (TH, Aug 28, 2001 :p.1). In 1998 alone there were more than 40 cases filed on caste clashes in TN (Kumutham, Feb 24, 2000:p.72-77).

Amnesty International report 2001 indicated that rural Dalit women suffer alarming violence. They are vulnerable to be raped by landlords, police and men of upper castes. Only about 5 percent of these cases ever go to the court because the police are often in league with the accused perpetrators of violence, Amnesty said (file:///A|/Low-Caste Women to Protest at UN Racism Meeting.htm). It is reported that Two Dalit women were paraded naked in Rasoolabad village near Kanpur (The Times of India, May 27, 2000).

In Tamil Nadu, Dalits experience hostility from Thevar community in the Southern districts and from Vanniar community in the Northern areas.
(TH, Oct 15, 2001 :p.3). When the conflicts were strenuous, often Dalits deserted the villages (TH, Sep 23, 2000:p.4). In Tamil Nadu, and other states where massacres and large-scale police attacks on Dalits in rural and urban settings continue to take place, state administrations yet to act swiftly without bias to bring offending state and private actors to justice (file:///AI/Broken People.htm; TH, June 20, 2001 :p. 3).

1.1.3.3 Governance

Perhaps the most significant development for women in the last decade has been the introduction of 33 per cent reservation for women in local village level (Panchayat Raj) elections. More and more women have shown that once they have power, they are able to use it, to the benefit of society in general and women in particular, (http://www.twinside.org.) However, there is ample delay currently in 81st constitutional amendment bill being considered for approval by the Indian Parliament that will allow the Indian government to set aside 33 per cent of the seats in the Lok Sabha and other legislative bodies in the states exclusively for women (file:///A|/Some Problems in the Movement for the Affirmation of Indian Women - Alok Mishra.htm).

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

**TABLE 1.4**

Women Representatives Elected in Tamil Nadu

(Local body election - 2001)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Details</th>
<th>Total seats</th>
<th>1/3 reservation</th>
<th>Actual reservation</th>
<th>SHG representation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Corporation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayors</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Councilors</td>
<td>474</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dist Panchayats</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chair persons</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ward members</td>
<td>656</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>227</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Municipalities</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chair persons</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Councilors</td>
<td>3,392</td>
<td>1,131</td>
<td>1,133</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Town Panchayats</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presidents</td>
<td>609</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Councilors</td>
<td>9,771</td>
<td>3,257</td>
<td>3,254</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Panchayat unions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chair persons</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ward members</td>
<td>6,570</td>
<td>2,190</td>
<td>2,319</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Village Panchayats</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presidents</td>
<td>12,618</td>
<td>4,206</td>
<td>4,329</td>
<td>276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ward members</td>
<td>97,523</td>
<td>32,508</td>
<td>32,696</td>
<td>2,161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>1,32,135</td>
<td>44,045</td>
<td>44,507</td>
<td>2,612</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: The Hindu, Madurai, Feb 17, 2002, p.5
Obviously, women have been contesting even seats other than those reserved for them and win. However, there is a fear that the elected women would be the rubber stamp leaders. But accepting Dalits as leaders had also risen to atrocious incidents. The atrocious killings at Malavalavu village, Madurai District were the typical example for the antagonistic attitude of caste people to accept Dalits as panchayat president (Kumutham, Feb 24, 2000:p.72-77). Furthermore, the uniform reluctance, on the part of all political parties, to give women their due share in political power at different levels, requires our attention.

1.2 Disparity as Dalit Women

Dalit women face specific problems which are uncommon to other caste women. Though in gender disparity they confront with the problems which common for all women, they are often alienated even from their fellow-women. The identity of caste secludes them from other women. The following discussion narrates the discrimination experienced uniquely by Dalit women in different aspects of life.

1.2.1 Identity of Dalits

In ancient times the Indian population was fragmented by the varna system. In the lowest rung of this system i.e. Brahmin, Kshtriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras, falls the ‘fifth caste’ traditionally known as untouchables or outcastes. Today they are known as 'scheduled castes' or 'Dalits'. The word, 'caste' came from the Portuguese word, 'casta', signifying 'breed,
race, or kind’ (Sunderaj, 2000:p.37) but in India it represents social stratification.

The term 'scheduled castes' was first incorporated into the Government of India act of 1935 and was continued to be promulgated in August 1950 in the free India (Santhakumari, 1982; Sunderaj, 2000). Scheduled caste is a constitutional and not a sociological concept. Because a caste can be specified as a scheduled caste only by the President of India; once specified, any inclusion or exclusion to the list can be made only through an act of the parliament (Chandra, 1981).

The term 'Dalit', is derived from the Sanskrit word 'dal', which means 'tom-asunder, broken, discriminated, disowned, subjugated, and a victim of apartheid'. But for the Dalit people, the real meaning of Dalit is "The struggle for Human Rights." Today in most of the Indian languages, the word 'Dalit' represents the oppressed and downtrodden. For centuries, Dalits have been socially suppressed, culturally neglected and economically exploited by upper caste people. They were not only known as the 'outcastes' or 'untouchables' of Indian society but also considered as 'unseeable, unapproachable, unshadowable and even unthinkable'. Concepts like "defilement (Theetu in Tamil), pollution, impurity, and exclusion" are blatantly attributed to the Dalits (file://A//atrocity.html).

There are 300 million Dalit people in the world, 250 million in Asia and 150 million of those in India alone. Dalits constitute 13.82 crores
(16.48 per cent) of the country's total population in 1991 census. One in every five Indians is a Dalit. Although 16.48 per cent of the total population comprises Dalits, yet the workload on their shoulders was a disproportionate 55 per cent (THT, Dec 21, 1998). More than 50 per cent of the Dalits in India are in the states of Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Tamil Nadu has the fourth highest Dalit population in India, i.e. 10.7 per cent. North Arcot district has the highest Dalit population of 19.8 per cent while Kanyakumari district has the lowest Dalit population of 4.8 per cent. In Dindigul district, Dalits constitutes 17.41 per cent of the total population.

1.2.2 Diversity of Dalits

D dalit community is not a homogenous group. Instead it comprises Hindus, Christians, Buddhists and Muslims. Estimates of the Dalit subgroups ranged from 500 to 900, many of them situated in specific areas of the country and speaking different languages (Das, 1982; Haslam, 1999:p.2). According Tamil Nadu Public Service Commission (TNPSC, 1999) the list of schedule castes in Tamil Nadu had numbered as seventy six (appendix-D). Some of the prominent schedule castes are Chakiliyar, Pallar, Parayar and Madari. Though all of them belong to the oppressed group more often they behave rivals to each other than standing together against the oppressive system.
1.2.3 Defilement - An Unending Episode

Untouchability is acute in villages. Dalits are denied access to temples, hotels, saloons, public cremation ground and public roads (TH, June 23, 1999:M.p.IV). Specifically in most of the places of Tamil Nadu, barber services are not available for Dalits and are not allowed in Gram Sabha (village council) sittings, social ceremonies and residential premises of high caste. Enforcing them to remove carcasses and showing discrimination in educational institution and public health services still exists in Tamil Nadu. The Dalit women are used or abused by caste men. Nevertheless the rice they cultivate or the baskets they weave do not defile the caste people (SOCO&MTU, 1997).

Dalit movements fighting against untouchability, casteism and economic exploitation are in India since 1920's. Dr. Ambedkar, Mahatma Gandhi and E.V.R. Periyar have made historical contributions towards the abolition of the 'heinous crime of untouchability' (NCDHR, 2000). Despite the fact that India constitutionally abolished the practice of "untouchability" in 1950, the practice continues in the constitution's fifty second year, and violence has become a defining characteristic of the abuse (file:///A/}Broken People.html. The Government needs to take strong steps to end untouchability (TH, Jan 7, 2002:p.3; Nov 2, 2001 :p.6). In Tamil Nadu, Dindigul, Coimbatore and Erode districts are worst affected by untouchability (TT, Sep 23, 2000:p.8).
1.2.4 Isolated Habitation

In rural India Dalits lived in separate hamlets away from the main village and it is called as 'colony' and other area is called as 'Oru'. In some places where the Pallar lived, it is called 'Pallacherry' and for Parayar 'Paracherry' ('cherry' means 'slum'). To abolish this crude style of life and to bring communal harmony, Samathuvapurams (equality villages) project was introduced in Tamil Nadu. But how far it served its objectives remains a question. Dalits had to worship in a separate temple, had to fetch water from isolated well or pond or had to wait for the caste people's mercy to pour some water in their pots. They were obliged to use burial grounds set apart for their exclusive use.

1.2.5 Double-tumbler system

'Double-tumbler system' persists in most of the Indian states. In which high castes are served in glass tumbler and Dalits have to drink tea in a separate stainless steel tumbler from the local teashop and wash their glasses afterwards. It has been reported that in Pudukottai district of Tamil Nadu there was, even a four-tumbler system existed, depending on the economic and social standing of the persons (TH, June 23, 1999:M.p.IV). In Oddanchatram taluk of Dindigul district 'double-tumbler system' exists in more than 25 villages (TT, Aug17, 2000:p.13). At Dindigul and Madurai District tea was being served in coconut shell for Dalits in some villages (Kumutham, Feb24, 2000:p.72-77). The Government intervention has
forced few of the tea stalls to use disposable plastic cups instead of ever-silver or glass tumblers.

1.2.6 Pecking order of Indian Society

A sickening attitude that Dalits are meant to serve the caste people continues to prevail in Indian society. They cannot be seated in front of the caste people especially on an elevated place or dais. Even on streets as a mark of respect they are expected to stand with folded hands in front of them or with the towel tided around their waist. The various efforts of Dalits to claim on the social ladder were often crushed by the violent activities of the caste people. Though few Dalits are educated and are well employed still they are looked down in their native villages by the caste people. It was also one of the causes for the Dalits to embrace other religion. The 'Diksha ceremony' organized by All India Confederation of SC/ST Organizations and the Lord Buddha Club in Nov 2001 where thousands of Hindu Dalits embraced Buddhism was a witness to it (TH, Nov 5, 2001:p.1).

Absence of open conflict is not an indication of real amity and peace. If smoldering discontent is suppressed, it can only be the peace of the graveyard (TH, June 23, 1999:M.p.IV). As the caste people keep the Dalits away, the social interaction among the different Dalit groups also distanced. A person belonging to Parayar caste does not take meals in the wedding banquet of Chakiliyar caste while attending the marriage. On
certain occasions the Parayars have felt let down by the Pallars (Suresh, 1996:p.357). A process of upward mobility was sought by the Dalits in the caste hierarchy. In which the Pallars have ‘puja’ room in a house as that of higher castes. But these externals can not be marked as empowerment.

1.3 Disparity as Rural Dalit Women

To live in rural India is to be deprived of basic amenities for daily living. But, according to census of India 2001, 72.22 per cent of Indian population is living in rural areas (TN- 56.14 per cent). Among Dalits, 81.3 per cent live in rural areas and only 19 per cent of them live in urban areas. In rural areas, 44.7 per cent of the Dalits live below the poverty line (Sakuntala, 1999). Dalit women, who constitute half of this population, are different from those of other poor and rural groups, from other Indian women and from Dalit men. They have been placed in most villages in such way that they constitute negligible percentage of the total population of the villages. Being small in number and with no support from fellow Dalits in neighbouring villages, they seldom protest the injustice done to them (Ramaiah, 1998).

The UNDP Report (1997) indicates that poverty has been retained over the years in India and has been carried over from one generation to the next among the 40 per cent of the rural Dalits population. Eradicating poverty has become the main focus during the Ninth Five Year Plan (1997-2002) and the target is to reduce poverty by 5 per cent over the
next 10 years. The vast majority of affirmative action policies and programmes, which are targeted towards the rural poor, are yet to reach the most disadvantaged groups of rural Dalit women.

Majority of rural Dalits are engaged in their traditional jobs, consequently they remained still poorer (Sunderaj, 2000: xvii) and it is said that about 75 per cent of them live below poverty line. However, there is a gradual change in rural areas because they have become aware of their rights, education, improvement in economic conditions and welfare measures. The ways, in which rural women are involved in social life as well as the consequences of that involvement have a bearing on the rural women's issues and the large struggles. Chipko movement, for instance, is a significant victory of the participation and involvement of Indian rural women. In 1974, when forest officials and contractors came to cut trees, women literally hugged the trees to prevent their cutting with the concern of preservation of forests and the maintenance of the eco-balance in the sub-Himalayan region.

Commitment of different movements and involvement of women in the private and Government machineries have brought definite changes in their lives. It also apprehends that the present movements need to involve more number of women towards transformation and progress in the society. The following discussion underlines how various organizations
and leaders have come up at various points of history to upgrade the status of Dalits at international, national and state level.

1.3.1 Efforts at the International Level

The International Dalit Solidarity Network was an initiative that has emerged among national and international human rights organizations and the development agencies in response to the struggle of Dalits in South Asia. Their goals were to raise consciousness on Dalit issues nationally and internationally, to advocate, separately or unitedly, on Dalit human rights in international fora, and to operate in smaller partnership groups on agreed regional or interest based areas of work.

Organizations involved in the Network include International Movement against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism (IMADR), Voices of Dalits International, Dalit Solidarity Forum - United States, Dalit Solidarity Network - United Kingdom, Ambedkar Center for Justice and Peace - Canada, Bread for the World - Germany and India's National Federation for Dalit Women (http://www.hrw.org). UN sponsored 'World conference against racism, radical discrimination and related discriminations and intolerances' in Durban, South Africa was held from Aug 31 to Sep 7, 2001 and the Dalit leaders attended the meeting unofficially (TH, July 4, 2001: p. 14).
1.3.2 Dalit Movement in India

Dalit movement in India has a history of over 100 years (Suresh, 1996:p.355). For centuries Dalits or so-called "untouchables" (known in legal parlance as 'scheduled castes') in India are routinely discriminated against, denied access to land, forced to work in degrading conditions, and routinely abused, even killed, at the hands of the police and of higher-caste groups that enjoy the state's protection. In what has been called India's "hidden apartheid," entire villages in many Indian states remain completely segregated by caste (http://www.hrw.org).

In India, Dalits were counted as a separate group in the Census Reports from 1870 onwards. Under the suggestion of Lord Simon who headed a Commission, they were called Scheduled Castes from 1934-1935 onward. Even after Independence this title continues for all official purposes. Their long and bitter struggle has enabled them remarkably to reduce the gravity of oppressive caste discrimination, economic exploitation, marginalized political participation and an unjust social order.

1.3.3 Pre-Independent Dalit Movement

Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, a non-Dalit was among the first social thinkers in Maharashtra to contribute for the well being of Dalits in the mid-nineteenth century. He worked ceaselessly for education of the women and Dalits, for upliftment of the underprivileged and down trodden and for reform of the Indian Social Structure (Laxman, 1996).
A number of independent movements too place during the early decades of twentieth century, namely M.C. Rajah of the Depressed Classes Federation (DCF) in Madras Presidency, Ayyaankali in Travancore, Swami Sharadhanand and Dr. B.R.Ambedkar in Maharastra. In the initial phase of Dalit Movement, the principal thrust was abolishing untouchability i.e. on temple entry, access to market places, removal of restrictions on admissions to schools, and free movement in public places such as roads, post offices, etc. Sathayagraha was the most radical method of protest that was employed during this period. Militant protest was an exception rather than the rule (Suresh, 1996:p.360).

The first All India Depresses Classes Conference was held on March 23-24, 1918. Eminent political leaders including Tilak participated in the same. It was sued an All India Anti-Untouchability Manifesto to the effect that it would not observe untouchability in their everyday life. Gandhi founded the Harijan Sevak Sangh in 1932. This resolution was to uplift the depressed classes both educationally and economically and removal of untouchability (Jain, 1997: p.20-21).

The second phase fought for a new identity as 'depressed classes' and strived to separate electorates and adequate representation for Dalits in elected bodies. Involvement of Dalits in the national movement was activated by espousal of Gandhi. Conflict between Gandhi and Ambedkar
embarked on even with the terminology of 'Harijans' (means 'Children of God') and 'Dalits' (means 'broken' or 'oppressed') respectively and extended up to the mobilization of Dalits. Ambedkar (1981:p.357) expressed, 'there is lamentable lack of resources at commend. We have no money. We have no press. The cruelest of tyrannies and oppressions, to which our people are subjected, day in and day out all over India, are never reported in press.'

The emergence and growth of the non-Brahmin movement did hold a considerable impact on the Dalit movement. Though the non-Dalit caste and Dalits developed greater solidarity and cohesion in organizing against the Brahmins, Dalit organizations showed a preference for retention of their separate characteristics and to integrate them into broader political movements dominated by non-Dalit caste or Brahmins. (Washbrook, 1989:p.215)

1.3.4 Dalit Movement since independence

Ambedkar was one of the chief architects of independent India in originating Indian Constitution. His sudden death in 1956, and thereafter the lack of a second rung of leaders brought the Dalit movement, which he had so effectively led for so long, to a grinding halt. The movement has in fact not recovered since and has not produced another leader with a capacity to hold various factions together within the fold of a single political organization (Suresh, 1996:p.367). With the spread of education and
exposure to new ideas, restlessness among the Dalits increased. But owing to the pressure of upper castes dominating all fields and their own divisions was coming as a hindrance in the way of their unity and emergence as a strong political and social movement.

Small organizations such as the Dalit Panthers of Maharastra, Dalit *Sangharsha Samiti* of Karnataka, Dalit *Sena* of UP, the Dalit Maha Sabha of AP, and also Dalit organizations in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Bihar and Gujarat sprung up during this phase. In 1988 attempts were being made to invite all small groups, organizations and parties under a Dalit Federation, to discuss common problems like annihilation of caste, de-hinduisation, to concentrate on economic and social development and strive to win power, (file:///A(/article.htm). Despite their articulateness and their strident projection of the programmes they have been unable to develop links in rural areas (Suresh, 1996:p.376).

National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) was launched on 10 Dec, 1998 by concerned human rights activists who worked among Dalits and were studying the effectiveness of the implementation of Schedule Caste/Schedule Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 in the different states of India. It upheld that 'Dalit rights are human rights' (NCDHR, 2000).
1.3.5 Dalit Movement in Tamil Nadu

Irattaimalai R. Srinivasan (1859-1945) organized the Adi Dravida Mahajana Sabha in 1881. The Depressed Classes Mission Society of Madras was established in 1909. It took up the task of educating the oppressed classes (Jain, 1997:p.20). Violence and human rights violations towards Dalits are indescribable in Tamil Nadu. In response to the struggles of Dalits in the state some of the organizations like People’s Watch, Dalit Media Network, Dalit Liberation Education Trust and International Dr. Ambedkar Centenary Movement have emerged in. The concrete activities of these organizations, for instance, Federation for Dalit Action and Liberation (FeDAL) at Vadipatti, near Madurai had launched out action to retrieve ‘panchami lands’ from unlawful occupiers (TH, July 22, 2000:p.4; TT, July 4, 2000:p.16).

1.3.6 Supportive Women’s Movements

The women’s movement in India today is a rich and vibrant movement, which has spread over all parts of the country. The non-governmental women’s organizations deal mostly with various problems pertaining to women and young girls (file:///A|/Some Problems in the Movement for the Affirmation of Indian Women — Alok Mishra.htm). There is no single cohesive movement in the country, but a number of fragmented campaigns strengthen the movement, which takes different
forms in different parts. While the movement may be scattered all over India, they feel it is nonetheless a strong and plural force.

Role of Dalit Women in the Social Reform Movement of the nineteenth century the Nationalist Movement after the 1920 were seldom noticed. A number of organizations depended on CSWB (Central Social Welfare Board established in 1953) not only proliferated but by becoming target-oriented, the women's organizations lost their earlier dynamism and sensitivity to Dalit women's issues. In short, till late sixties many women's organizations remained only in papers but seldom functioned.

The period from the late sixties had been marked by economic crisis and stagnation, rising prices, increasing landlessness, and generalized discontent both in rural and urban areas. As a result, women were mobilized in large numbers and they participated in general struggles of the rural poor, tribal and industrial working class and specifically no women's issues were taken up. In 1954, Communist Party of India (CPI) established a National Federation of Indian Women and the Naxalbari Movement, started in 1960, had great influence on women.

Women's organizations in India trace their origin to the mid 1970's. During this period women in the big cities began organizing in small groups to protest against the increasing violence on women and to demand better legal protection for women. However, it is doubtful whether India had a strong women's movement (Kishwar, 1988). It is still largely
an urban phenomenon, consisting of well-educated middle and upper middle class women, who constitute only a small part of the urban population.

Similarly, in early 1970’s the anti-price rise movement spearheaded by the united front, mobilized middle class housewives. They agitated against the empty hearths and scarcity of essential goods. Though the mainstream women's organizations were busy in carrying out the programmes of cultural activities, craft classes and beauty shows, the left political parties in their mass movements were mobilizing women and at certain points of times, women took the leadership and along with other demands focused attention on women's issues (Desai and Krishnaraj, 1990).

Some of the glaring inequalities and the worsening position of women in Indian society were reported in the document Towards Equality' (CSWI, 1974). The International Women's Year observed in 1975 was extended to a decade. Besides drawing attention of women's issues it encouraged women's groups and March 8th was celebrated as International Women's Day. The consequent emergences of women's organizations could be categorized as below:

- Women's wings/ fronts of political parties.
- Professional women's organizations such as doctors, lawyers, journalists, etc.
- Women's groups mainly involved in research and documentation.
Mainstream women's organizations with their traditional/moderate ideology and their mixture of welfare, educational, recreational, economic and legal activities.

Pre-movements in which women participated in equal or greater numbers and with as much or greater militancy than men. (Desrochers, 1991).

The beginning of the 1990's found two streams of women's organizations. One catering to traditionally defined feminine needs and perpetuating the status quo and the other was providing economic relief to middle and lower class women (ex. Self Employed Women's Association). On the other hand, a network of more radical and more feminist groups loosely consolidated around certain key issues had also emerged, moving beyond protest marches and demonstrations. Women activists have spread awareness among women of their rights and their potentials to become a powerful presence in corridors of policy (Katiyar and Rai, 1995).

In characterizing the structure of the Indian women's movement, it can be outlined as two ideological and organizational tendencies: one, the 'rights wing', focuses on rights and equality; and the other, the 'empowerment wing', stresses personal and community empowerment of poor women. The effectiveness of the Indian women's movement depends on empowerment groups, which tap into essential resources by cooperating with the state (Caiman, 1992).
1.3.7 Dalit Women's Movement

Dalit Women's Movement can be characterized in one sense as the rebellious child of two movements existing prior to it namely Dalit and women's movement. The impetus for forming an autonomous Dalit women's movement finds its root largely in Dalit women's experiences with both movements. Dalit women live mostly in villages where they work as agricultural labourers by the side of their men. Even in urban areas they are largely illiterate and work in the unorganized sector (Nandu, 1998:p.114). However, they have traditionally filled the ranks of Dalit movements or women's movements.

The position of Dalit women was commonly under represented or neglected by women's and Dalit's movements. The lone case of an independent Dalit women's organization was the All India Depressed Classes Women’s Conference held its session in Nagpur on July 20, 1942. Ambedkar addressed the impressive gathering of more than 20,000 Dalit women and had asked them to eliminate the inferiority complex from the hearts and minds of their children and educate them by inculcating high ambition in them. He had also asked them to stand by their men on an equal footing (Das, 1979:p. 193-194).

In the late eighties Dalit women increasingly started arguing that their needs, difficulties and aspirations were seldom accounted by both movements. They felt the need for the separate platform and emerged as
a recognizable category of Dalit women's movement in early nineties. During this period three Dalit women's organizations were created on a national scale. In 1987 Ruth Manorama, president of Women's Voice, an organization helped to organize the first national meeting of Dalit women in Bangalore; that gave rise in 1995 to the National Federation of Dalit Women that was protesting in Durban at the anti-racism conference from Aug 31 to Sept. 7, 2001 (file:///A//Low-Caste Women to Protest at UN Racism Meeting, htm.). It demonstrated and demanded that caste discrimination be considered and condemned on par with racism.

All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), a national women's movement organized a convention on 'Dalit Women's Rights against Untouchability and Oppression' to support the causes of Dalit women (THT, Dec 21, 1998). 'National Conference on Dalit Women' held in 1999 brought out a report of Dalit Women's rights and status in India (NCDHR, 2000).

1.3.8 Dalit Women's Movement in Tamil Nadu

The status of Dalit women in Tamil Nadu is dismal. Dalit women movements have taken numerous efforts to uplift their situation. AIDWA initiated in organizing women in different parts of India especially in Tamil Nadu (Bumiller, 1991). The following instances vividly describe their involvement in the struggles of Dalit women:
> At Surilipatty, Theni District Dalit women were molested by high caste men on Dec16, 1997. AIDWA women condemned and agitated against this event.

> At Oddanchathram, Dindigul District Dalit women were asked to stand in a separate queue in Public Distribution System (PDS) shops. They were not allowed to stand along with their fellow women. Hence, AIDWA women organized meetings to highlight the problems of Dalit women in Dindigul. They also organized the same at Pondicherry, Cuddalore and Chidambaram (Malai Malar, Mar 8, 2000:p.4)

In September 2000 Dalit women conference was organized mobilizing nearly 10,000 Dalit women from all over the state by Tamil Nadu Dalit Pengal iyakkam (Tamil Nadu Dalit Women's Movement). The meet discussed various issues such as untouchability, caste atrocities, the impact of globalization on Dalit women and violence against women during caste clashes. The meet was inherited a separate identity for Dalit women and made them aware of their rights (TH, Sep 13, 2000:5). But the various Dalit fora were not giving due importance to Dalit women and their problems (TH, Sep 14, 2000:5).

In fighting against the rampant problem of selling illicit liquor Dalit women have played a major role. Two Dalit Self-Help Group women were assassinated in the brutal attack. Tamil Nadu Dalit Pengal iyakkam (Tamil Nadu Dalit Women's Movement) headed by Burnad Fatima along with other groups under took a fact-finding mission in the victims' village. Tamil Nadu Dalit Pengal iyakkam (Tamil Nadu Dalit Women's Movement)
organized a State level meet in Erode on eradication of untouchability in Nov 2001.

It demanded a watchdog committee to prevent untouchability crimes, priority for Dalits in education and job opportunities, an awareness campaign on human rights and distribution of ‘panchami’ land to Dalit women (TH, Nov 22, 2001 :p.4). In the International Movement against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism (IMADR), Tamil Nadu Women's Forum occupies significant position by doing the entire documentation of cases of discrimination and violence against Dalit women.

1.3.9 Legal Enactments

Realizing the pathetic plight of Dalits, Indian constitution had initiated to safe guard the rights of Dalits i.e. education (article 15/4), reservation in employment (art.16/4), abolition of untouchability (art.17), and reservation in Assemblies and Parliament (art. 330&332). In addition, Untouchability Act -1955, Protection of Civil Rights Act -1955 and legal free aid cells were enacted. In education, reservation and relaxed age and qualification are being followed.

In 1989, India enacted the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act to prevent and punish state and private actors for abuses against Dalits, to establish special courts for the trial of such offenses, and to provide for the rehabilitation and relief of the victims. With severe penalty advocated in this Act, Dalit women were not being registered under it (TH, Sep 9, 2000:p.4). If there is no considerable
serious and sustained commitment in implementing constitutional safeguards and other national and international legal protections, Dalit women rights abuses would continue to exist and lead to most degrading forms of human life. (file:///A)/Broken People.htm; TH, Jan 20, 2001:p.4).


1.3.10 Reservation

Dalits struggles have resulted in reservation, the primary importance of their development. The political reservation had assured 79 out of 544 seats in the Lok Sabha and 577 out of a total of 3997 seats in all the State Assemblies for Dalits. However there is no reservation of seats in Rajya Sabha. Reservation Policy of the Government of India is being followed in educational institutions and in various Government Departments. Pinto (2000) discussed interestingly on whether reservation could be the answer for Dalit empowerment. Since over 50 years it had not brought out total transformation he suggested that an attack on the
unjust system and inclusion of reservation in private sector was also
needed.

1.3.11 Government Programmes

There are various developmental programmes available for Dalits which are yet to make aware to them (TH, Jan 4, 2002:4). Some of the Central Government programmes cater to the upliftment and welfare of this oppressed group namely: condensed courses of education for women, vocational training program for women, awareness generation program, family counseling centers, working women's hostels, creches for the children of working and ailing mothers, Rashtriya Mahila Kosh, Indira Mahila Yojana and Support to training and employment program for women. Each State Government too has separate programmes for women and Dalits.

1.3.12 Failure of Protective Measures

The Government of India has reflected, articulated and addressed tender issues of Dalits and women from a new perspective. It called to “transform India from a male dominated society to a gender-just and gender equitable society,” in IX Five Year Plan 1997. But the Governments’ measures of protective discrimination have not benefited the Dalit women as much as expected. Women have not actively participated in most of the developmental process and program. The fruits of these programmes are often neither sustainable nor desirable. It is to
be noted that development if not engendered is indeed endangered (Srinivasan, 1997: p.13). Besides, the Dalit women have been experiencing greater set back because of the 'double-bind' of being women and being Dalit (Mitra, 1997:p.206). Therefore alternative approaches have become invariably warranted for the empowerment of Dalit women against discrimination.

1.4 In Search of Alternatives

Opting for alternative approaches against the age-old oppressive social systems has become the contemporary forceful necessity. In order to build up gender balance, to instill gender consciousness and to establish gender justice, the rural Dalit women could be empowered through gender sensitization, information empowerment and self-help enterprises. To achieve this target, developmental schemes including health, education, safe drinking water and income generation programmes need to be extended primarily to the socially disadvantaged Dalit women. In this context ‘Self-Help Groups’ (SHGs) have emerged as informal institution to bring about sustainable rural development during the last decade.

The women's welfare programmes traditionally undertaken by the TN Government have been replaced and the development programmes are implemented through SHGs. TN has a long history of activism for women's welfare and rights, which has increasingly focused on women's
economic rights. A range of government programmes including SHGs have been launched to increase economic opportunity for women, although there appear to be no existing programmes to address the cultural and traditional discrimination against women that leads to abject conditions. Hence SHGs emerged to directly address gender specific causes of poverty, otherwise the gains to women may be short-lived.

1.5 Self-Help Movement in Rural India

In the vast stretches of the Indian countryside the organizing of women activist groups had been negligible. This was not to say that rural women had been inactive. Women had, no doubt, played an important part in various movements, but in a more sporadic manner (Kishwar, 1988). Women at grassroots, when they were organized, emanate a kind of energy and determination for change, which galvanized all those who worked with them. Thus, the strength and sustenance of the women's movement depended on the effective marshalling of women at the grassroots (Mazumdar, 1994).

At this juncture Self-Help movement had emerged as a new concept. Unlike other Government programmes it was not handled by Government officials but by the women themselves. SHG was a phenomenon, which aimed at safeguarding people from exploitative informal financial system, primarily from moneylenders. It also aspired to bring integral changes in the lives of rural Dalit women.
1.6 Need for the Study

Both Central Government of India and State Government of Tamil Nadu have shifted their approach in welfare schemes from individual to group approach. In this context, the role of SHGs has become very prominent in order to empower the rural women and the downtrodden. However systematic studies on SHGs are conspicuous by their absence. There is also a need to develop scientific tools to popularize research in this field.

The various dimensions of empowerment need to be analyzed in order to develop integrated strategies for the uplift of the rural people. Moreover, Dindigul district has considerably large number of Dalit population (17.41 per cent). Their empowerment depends up on the concerted efforts by the Government and NGOs through Self-Help Groups. Therefore, an analytical study will help to formulate policy and programmes for their empowerment.

1.7 Statement of the Problem

After graduation in social work, when the researcher reached the rural areas of Dindigul District to work with the rural community the poverty of those hamlets drew the attention. Even among those poor of the villagers there were groups secluded from the main stream i.e. Dalits. Walking into the lives of those Dalits, it was heart rending to see and to listen to the pathetic situation especially of the rural Dalit women.
Analyzing their situations and social structure, it revealed the triple oppression has made them less than a human being. They were powerless in dealing with their life and experienced helplessness in dealing with their family and social lives.

The researcher who witnessed their plight and shared in their sufferings did not want to stop with mere empathy. But she wanted to respond to their silent cry to be empowered in their lives. Therefore she decided to comprehend their historical background and the present situation more intensely and scientifically. Working with them in groups brought new rays of hope. Then the popular programme which reached the rural Dalit women was Self-Help Groups (SHGs). With an intellectual curiosity she determined to study the degree of empowerment SHGs could bring in their lives and with the inquisitive mind she wished to search for better and apt approach in empowering them. Thus the present study aims at portraying the strengths of the effective Self-Help Groups, the possibilities of reducing defaults and the avenues of multiplying their resources for empowering the Dalit Women.

The analysis is undertaken to find out the empowerment achieved among the socially deprived classes to improve health and nutritional status, educational achievement, access to resources and increase real income per capita. The emphasis is to make policy efforts aimed at making these developmental achievements sustainable lasting well into
the future. Their empowerment needs to be looked at from different perspectives such as individual, group, community, collaborating organizations and the state too.

The study would envisage whether the realistic approach of Self-Help Groups, the expected promotion of sustainability and empowerment of socially disadvantaged rural Dalit Women can be readily attained. Moreover, there were not many studies conducted to examine the precise role of SHG in bringing changes among the Dalit women in Tamil Nadu. Therefore, it is essential to assess the changes and the impact the SHGs have on the rural Dalit women. It was necessary to find out factors that facilitate progressive changes in empowering the Dalit women.

1.8 Concern of Gandhi

As a scholar of Gandhigram University the researcher wished to make the dream of Mahatma Gandhi in bringing equality in Indian society to be actualized. Gandhi who, took a special interest on women and Dalits, addressed Dalits as 'Harijans' (meaning 'children of God') and worked for their upliftment and to make them full-fledged citizens of India. But for all this it is unfortunate that they continue to be in the same conditions even after 55 years of freedom. The advocacy of removing untouchability, which was strongly proposed by Mahatma Gandhi, is still not realized by a large number of rural areas in India.
Beginning with the period of Gandhi, Dalit women have initiated and participated in various movements to enhance their status in the society. Various governmental and non-governmental agencies too have taken numerous efforts to obtain the balance in every sphere of Dalit women's life. However changes are seldom seen in their lives. The development indicators namely sex ratio, mean age at marriage, health, literacy rate, work participation rate and participation in decision making bodies bare witness to the lower status quo and the disparity manifested in various forms of women in India.

The present study aims at analyzing the SHG and its role in empowering the rural Dalit women,

> Does educational standard and self-esteem of rural Dalit women transform their lives and participation in SHG movement?

> Do their social awareness and their civil consciousness grow in becoming a member of SHG?

> Have they formalized the indigenous savings and credit system to provide economic stability and dynamism of SHG movement?

> Have they been politically motivated to move out of exploitative structure as SHG movement?

> What new alternatives and strategies could be introduced for the emancipation of rural Dalit women and effective functioning of SHG movement?
1.9 Title of the Study

'EMPOWERMENT OF RURAL DALIT WOMEN: A STUDY OF SELF-HELP GROUPS IN DINDIGUL DISTRICT

1.10 Objectives
The major objectives were,

(i) to prepare a profile of rural Dalit women members in SHGs;
(ii) to describe the functioning of SHGs and the role of NGOs in empowering Dalit women;
(iii) to find out factors fostering the empowerment of Dalit women;
(iv) to study the social, economic, political, educational and psychological empowerment of Dalit SHG women members; and
(v) to offer suggestions for effective functioning of SHGs in empowering the rural Dalit women.

1.11 Definition of Terms

• Dalits

The term 'Dalit' means oppressed groups. The Schedule Caste groups women belonging to Chakiliyar, Parayar, Pallar and Madari are mostly socially suppressed, culturally neglected and economically exploited and have been chosen as the Dalit women for the study.
• Empowerment

'Empowerment' which means 'becoming powerful', is a process by which individuals, groups and communities are able to take control of their circumstances and achieve their own goals. It enables them to work towards helping themselves and others to maximize the quality of their lives. The various dimensions of empowerment such as educational, economic, psychological, social and political are interlinked.

• Self-Help Groups

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) are voluntary small groups which are usually formed by women who had come together for mutual assistance in satisfying a common need, overcoming a common life-disrupting problem and bringing about desired change. SHGs formed in rural India usually consisted of fifteen to twenty members hailing from a certain locality with similar socio-economic backgrounds.

1.12 Chapterisation

The first chapter explains the research problem posed, objectives aimed and the various concepts. A review of the social reform movements in India and emergence of women's and Dalits movement have also been presented in this chapter.

The second chapter portrays the concepts on empowerment, Self-Help Groups and agencies promoting Self-Help Groups movements.
Studies conducted in different states of India and abroad are reviewed separately.

The third chapter on methodology gives a complete account of research design, sampling techniques, tools and techniques of data collection and mode of analysis.

The fourth chapter deals with the data analysis based on the brief social survey of the study area. The profile of SHG members and the various factors empowering rural Dalit women are discussed. The subsections of this chapter attempts to give relation between the subscales and cumulative scale of empowerment.

The concluding chapter gives a brief report of the salient findings, the scope and social significance that the study holds for empowerment of rural Dalit women and suggestions for future research on the subject.