Chapter V
Summary and Conclusions

Women's issues have been a matter of concern for the last two decades. Social scientists have attempted to develop conceptual frameworks for understanding the vulnerable conditions of women which kept half the population marginalised. With the concerted efforts of academicians, activists and planners it has been realised and accepted that no society can progress unless it involves women in the socio economic and political process. Various projects and programmes have been launched to improve the status of women and to bring them in the mainstream. However, the pace of change has remained slow and the desired results could not be achieved. Gender gap continues to persist and women remain discriminated and exploited within social structures. The reasons identified for the failure of policies meant for women's development were many. Rakowski (1991:149) held patriarchal ideology responsible for the "underdevelopment of women" and said that it was firmly rooted in the less developed societies which subsequently affects their developmental programmes. Policies embedded with gender bias have fully ignored the heterogeneity of the existing social structures and processes in different societies and regions.
Coming down to the Indian society, the status of women reveals a distressing story. In the earlier paradigm of development it was thought that economic growth would have trickle down effect and fruits of development would reach to all sections of society. But soon it has been realised that this kind of a development approach has broadened the gap among different social groups. In this approach of economic growth, emphasis was more on quantifiable variables such as literacy, fertility and employment rates. Statistics shows that women's status remained low, despite siphoning of funds for their development. It was felt that women as a social class needed special efforts to improve their conditions. The sixth five year plan proved a landmark in this regard, it added a separate chapter on women and development. Women's economic independence has been considered as a key factor since then. Various income generating, training and credit programmes have been introduced in order to make women self-reliant.

A retrospective look at the planning process shows that there had been a constant shifting in the strategy of five year plans. Slow pace of women's development was found due to government's inability, procedural complexities and inadequate delivery system and hence, it was thought that without women's participation, success cannot be ensured. Greater emphasis
was laid down on the non governmental organisations. This alternative approach that emphasized on voluntarism geared to help women to assert their own autonomous power, vis a vis both government and the commercial system. First and foremost advantage of the voluntaristic approach is that it is people centered and lays emphasis on human will and capacity. Participation is the key to strengthening women's capacities and mobilizing their potential and the urge to create and sustain development. Thus, the idea was with its flexibility, greater autonomy and grass root participation, non governmental organisations has been considered a better way to women's development.

The Rotating Savings and Credit Associations (ROSCAs) are also a kind of non governmental organisation. They are indigenous saving groups usually evolved by women to fulfil a varied range of goals. Though ROSCAs can be broadly viewed as institutions that provide credit and mutual aid, yet they are specifically defined as "associations formed upon a core of participants who make regular contributions to a fund which is given in whole or in part to each contributor in turn". Women participate in these groups in large numbers. Their prevalence among varied sections of society reaffirms the belief that they perform multifarious functions for its members. Over recent years a new and growing interest in

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ROSCAs has been shown by social scientists interested in theoretical and developmental issues. More recently scholars from the developing societies have been increasingly drawn towards the study of these institutions for developmental planning because of their indigenous roots. However, most of these studies have been done by economists who can not give a complete picture of ROSCAs through their macroscopic studies. A better understanding of savings groups such as ROSCAs requires microscopic analysis. A great variety of other institutions offer credit facilities and provide women with a wide choice, then how is it that this indigenous institution of savings still sustains and performs various functions for its members. Studies on credit financing have shown that marginal groups such as women, migrants and ethnic groups find it difficult to cope with bureaucratic structures and prevailing prejudices of the debtor agencies. Conversely, the speed with which ROSCAs usually react to their members' needs can rarely be matched by distant impersonal banking systems. Through ROSCAs, women gain access to a network of other women and solve their various problems especially financial one. Women play a pivotal role in maintaining relations with kinspersons, neighbours, and friends. ROSCAs developed on these pre-existing bond depend for their effectiveness on this very relationships that forms the basis of mutual trust. In
the urban context, loosening of kinship ties pave the way for the emergence of ROSCAs.

The present study focuses on ROSCAs and their impact on women's lives. In India, much is there to be explored. Some of the recent attempts have highlighted their significance in women's lives. There is a need for deeper understanding of the subject. The present study was undertaken with the following objectives:

(i) To study the socio demographic profile of ROSCA members;
(ii) To study the origin, organisational structure and membership patterns of ROSCAs;
(iii) To study the manifest and latent functions of ROSCAs and their impact on women's lives.

The study was done in Lucknow. Sixteen ROSCA groups from varied socio economic background were selected for the study. In all, the study had a sample size of 267 ROSCA members subscribing to 16 ROSCAs in 15 localities of the city of Lucknow. Interview schedule was the main tool with which the core data was collected apart from observation and oral histories.

Analysing the socio economic background of the ROSCA subscribers, the study reveals that generally married women, in the age group of 21 to 45 years join such self help savings groups. Women of all religions and caste groups were found subscribing to ROSCAs. However, the women of the middle
ranking castes had joined ROSCAs in large numbers. This finding goes contrary to the finding of Krishnan (1954) according to whom ROSCAs were restricted to higher caste (Brahmin) people. Another prominent finding of this study in relation to caste was that some ROSCAs were found to be caste specific or even occupation specific. Though most ROSCAs were popular with housewives, they were also quite popular with economically active women but fewer women from households with higher occupations subscribed to ROSCAs.

For the proper understanding of groups like ROSCAs it was considered important to study their origin, organisational structure and membership pattern. The structure of any association depends on the nature of functions performed by them. The analysis of ROSCAs in this study shows that they are relatively old institutions that were popular with poor women of Lucknow. Their origin could be traced to the 1940s. Their organisational structure shows that ROSCAs patronized by women were usually small groups consisting of ten to thirty two members. Mainly four types of ROSCAs could be identified among the selected units. These were kitty, beesi, boli, and kameti. Socialisation was an integral feature of kitty groups alongwith savings. The other three kinds of ROSCAs that is beesis, bolis and kametis were constituted mainly for the purpose of savings. The role of the organiser was more
important in ROSCA groups where savings were the main purpose. Risk bearing capacity was the main criteria for becoming an organiser besides, accounting ability, honesty, selection of rotation, or the bureaucratic status of the spouse. Membership criteria were based on gender but other important characteristics were personal qualities such as trustworthiness, class, caste, religion and locale. In kitty groups, socialisation and feasting played an important part. Beesi groups were constituted by women of poorer strata of the society. The amount of subscription was small but the number of subscribers was large in these groups. Boli groups were distinct in their method of operation. They represented the commercial interests of the members and attracted usually entrepreneurs in their fold. Kametis were popular among Punjabi refugee families and were constituted largely by kinspersons and neighbours. Usually, the ROSCA meetings took place in the organiser's house, a restaurant on a monthly basis most of the time. Sometimes, because of situational demands such as a sudden economic crisis the meetings were held fortnightly or weekly. In ROSCAs where socialisation was an important function the ROSCA meetings were held for a longer duration than where only savings were the aim of the members. Rules were framed with mutual consensus of all the members. The order of rotation was decided by the draw of
lots and ROSCA funds were transferred only in situations of emergency.

The chapter on significance of ROSCAs in women's development was divided into three parts. The first part referred to issues of financial significance, the second part looked into the issue of ROSCAs as means of social interaction and support; and the third part relates to the role of ROSCAs in women's empowerment. With regard to the financial significance of ROSCAs the present study reveals that women join these groups for accumulating savings. Background characteristics such as family income, occupation, caste and age of the women have a bearing on their decision to join ROSCAs. Usually, ROSCAs are subscribed by housewives who have no independent source of money except housekeeping amount. Economically independent women also subscribe to ROSCAs. Some of the beesi and kameti members from the lower social classes had not disclosed their ROSCA membership to their family members out of the fear that their housekeeping fund may be curtailed. Most ROSCA subscribers had complete control over their ROSCA funds. Only few had parted with their ROSCA savings to their spouses for investment in business. The findings of the present study also run counter to the claim of earlier studies that ROSCA funds were spend only for fulfilling the consumption needs of the members. The present
study points out that savings have been used for both production and consumption oriented activities and a sufficient number of ROSCA members were investing their savings in productive activities. They were depositing their fund money in the bank, investing for the construction of a house, for setting up an enterprise or expanding it and in paying back the loan. The manner in which the ROSCA members utilised savings was also associated with their social class. Subscribers from the high and middle social classes deposited their savings in the bank while subscribers from the lower social classes invested their fund money in the construction of a house or in the repayment of a loan. Subscribers who used their savings for entrepreneurial activities belonged to all social classes. Utilising ROSCA funds for consumption activities shows that persons from high income groups preferred to spend their prize fund on the purchase of consumer goods such as household gadgets or jewellery and the low or middle income groups spent the amount for meeting their survival needs such as those of rations, medicines, education of children and clothes.

The significance of ROSCAs as facilitators of social interaction and as a fulcrum of social support is highlighted by the deep rootedness of ROSCA networks and their wide spread appeal among women. In fact, these networks help in
maintaining the balance of gender based power relationships. Women's networks help to connect related and unrelated women and thereby consolidate and widen their social base. Networks formed by women were of three types. The mixed networks were formed for the purpose of socialisation alongwith savings. Ego centric networks comprised of women of lower social classes and in these groups kinship was the main base for developing social networks. Situational factor gave rise to exo centric networks in which members interacted for the purpose of familiarising themselves with the outside world, to break their isolation and offer moral and material support to the members of the group. ROSCAs formed by the women of the same religion or caste group had a pre stated goal of strengthening community ties and maintaining group interests. Subscribers' preference for the type of a persons joining ROSCAs depended on the type of ROSCA. ROSCAs in which socialisation was the main part, emphasis was put on the personality characteristics of the members and ROSCAs in which savings were the main purpose, financial credibility of the members was preferred. Relations developed through ROSCA networks sometimes became so strong that the same were also extended to the familial domain of the members. Family interactions included both informal casual visiting relationships as well as formal interaction on festive and
other socio cultural occasions. The nature of these interactions was determined by the nature of the group. Interactional support provided by kitty group members was intangible in nature. It consisted mainly of counselling, guidance and exchange of information. ROSCAs where savings were the main motive members provided tangible support such as giving prize fund out of turn in a crisis situation or if a member fell short of something she was given some grains etc. to tide over the crisis. In situations where the woman is working in the service sector or has an unpleasant experience, her relations with the ROSCA members remain superficial because of the lack of time to cement relationships. However, those who were involved in the entrepreneurial activities, they found ROSCA relationship as a means for expanding their enterprise because relations developed through ROSCA have been perceived as a social capital. Frequent contacts among members make the relationship so strong that even if the ROSCA membership ceases, interactions continue to persist. Thus, ROSCAs perform the important function of integrating members in a society.

ROSCAs also play an important role in the circulation of information which is very beneficial for the members. Information exchanged during ROSCA meetings help women to solve various problems confronted in their day-to-day life.
situations. The information does no longer remain a scarce commodity. It provides participants a communication network. Information shared at group level give equal benefit to each member. ROSCAs are also a medium of empower in another way. They help to bring out women's innate and acquired skills. ROSCA participation develops in women a feeling of well being and reduces their dependency to a considerable extent. Most ROSCA subscribers had developed a greater sense of autonomy because of the enhancement of their skills and their capacities to earn money and their ability to negotiate with the others. Most ROSCA subscribers had also taken their own decision to join the group. Accessibility of easy credit helped many ROSCA participants to invest their lumpsum in a business venture and they could make themselves self reliant.

On the basis of the above analysis it can be concluded that indigenous financial institutions such as Rotating Savings and Credit Associations have been equally popular among women of all social classes and play an important role in women's lives. Most women do not have connections with formal institutions. Integration of marginal groups, such as women, in the development process entails their acquaintance with the formal organisation of production and delivery system. Women overcome these hurdles by developing informal networks based on participatory approach to achieve their
different goals. ROSCAs based on the principle of group participation give women access to institutional than personal resources. In other words, ROSCAs allow women access to resources and services which would otherwise have remained inaccessible at the individual level. Uniting with a group whose members are placed in similar circumstances safeguards their interests in adverse conditions and enhances their bargaining capacity. ROSCAs provide women with a legitimate forum for collective action as well as giving them status within their own community. Community status becomes particularly important for women where most positions of authority are open only to men.

Women's participation in these voluntary organisations helps them to mitigate their suffering to a great extent. ROSCAs have been identified as institutions that narrowly organise their activities around explicit economic goals. Formation of ROSCAs help women to rely on a network of connections between women to gain credit and support in the case of emergencies. These networks help poor women in fulfilling their subsistence needs while the better off women spend their savings on consumer goods. ROSCAs are also a potential source of capital for entrepreneurial activities. Women use ROSCA credit for their business activity and make themselves self reliant. It is a possible source of funds to
cover contingencies and emergencies. Therefore, to consider ROSCAs as merely 'domestic' or 'social' gatherings where women get together to gossip, exchange news and do good work would be to give a distorted picture. In fact, ROSCA networks have great relevance for wider society. They help in absorbing the destabilising impact of development by using traditional social institutions. In fact, it is a strategy which women of low class evolve to meet survival needs and women of middle and high social class use it to improve their standard.

The analysis of ROSCA networks and groups brings out the underlying social factors that affect their formation and functioning. The formation of these groups depends primarily on the nature of interests and the inadequacy of traditional collectivities and modern institutions to meet their requirements. Women forge links establish networks and form groups to get over the inadequate of traditional collectivities such as family, kin or caste and yet these relationships are mobilised for the formation of resource networks (ROSCAs). There are other bases of social alliances such as workmateship, neighbourhood and friendship. Although these relationships are based on structurally diverse norms, they only provide bases for social contacts which serve as a catchment for forging networks (Sharma, 1977:158).

The resource networks are functional for women because
they guarantee social support by providing the right links, access to credit and social support. In view of the dismal performance of formal institutions and traditional collectivities the mushrooming growth of these resource networks indicates their importance for women. Changes in social structure have necessitated new bases for social alliances. Since persistence of gender based discrimination denies women access to formal credit, they mitigate this problem by forging ROSCA alliances. It helps women to preserve the money (savings and credit) over which they have almost complete control and which give them a feeling of their "own money". Money saved helps not only the women but also their family members.

Communication has a vital role in ROSCA meetings. Members meet and communicate with each other. Frequent meetings add to the cohesiveness of the group and controls unhealthy competitiveness among individuals and instils in them a desire for solidarity or sisterhood, and of sharing and exchanging resources. Participation in such activities also helps in stripping-off the individualistic garment. Women's networks are based on horizontal communication channels which help to break the silence of the 'silenced' group. This kind of informal social networks have an important function in overcoming the difficult life events. Proximity, propensity
to communicate and frequency help to further cement the relationships. Communication in such groups is expressive and yet informative and vital for the survival of the group.

Despite the above mentioned positive features of ROSCAs, there are certain limitations of these groups also. A common impression is that lack of proper maintenance of records pave the way for embezzlement and forgery of funds. Organisers sometimes dupe the subscribers. Fraud and malpractice create insecurity among the subscribers. Such a situation arises only when the size of ROSCA becomes unwieldy and the members are recruited indiscriminately and are relatively unknown to one another.

In the end, a few suggestions can be given to promote the use of ROSCA networks for the development of women: One, savings made through ROSCAs could also be integrated with the organised financial sector so as to provide a meaningful credit system for women. Since ROSCA institutions are informal, flexible and adaptive in nature they have a great potential to generate both savings and credit for women's development programmes especially, the income generation programmes. In a society where women are not treated equally and the governmental institutions pay only lip service to women's interests, informal groups like ROSCAs have much scope to raise the status of women. If encouraged, ROSCAs can
consolidate their constituency and provide a wider base for women's development.

Two, savings made by women through self help groups like ROSCAs contribute directly to the economic and social growth of the nation yet women's participation in these informal activities has remained invisible or has been considered unhealthy for the growth of the nation. Their prevalence, popularity and efficacy show that the existence of the formal sector cannot deny their existence and importance for women. In fact, the formal sector is interlinked with the informal in such a way that the two can not be treated as dichotomous categories.

Three, studies on ROSCAs can provide a useful data base. Understanding the exact nature and extent of ROSCA participation among women in different settings can give insights into the dynamics of informal structures and their various possibilities for women's development.

In fact, ROSCAs could be integrated with the formal banking system. Banks, by patronizing ROSCAs could receive the first instalment of the prize fund which could be used for banking operations while the others could be disbursed among the members. This will instill a feeling of security among the investors/subscribers. Women organizer can be a link person between subscribers and the financial institution.
Also, there is dearth of literature on gender based ROSCAs in the urban areas of the northern region. Most studies have been conducted in rural areas of the southern region. More sociological studies are required to look into the social and cultural variables that pave the way for their emergence.