Women empowerment and gender equality have become topics of utmost importance in the recent times, because gender inequality and its socio-economic and cultural dimensions are all pervasive in the third world as well as in the developed world. However, in the third world, the problem of gender inequality is more acutely associated with economic disempowerment of women. And therefore, of recent, several initiatives are being taken up in the third world countries for the economic empowerment of women so as to reduce the gender inequality. Among these initiatives, the Self-Help Group (SHG) movement, which is getting wide spread all over the third world, has become the prominent one.

The research interest of the present study was mainly to examine whether SHGs actually contribute to empower women economically as well as socially. The study has also examined another problem that whether there is significant variation in the performance of government-run and NGO-run SHGs. The study depends mainly on primary data, collected through sample survey of households of SHG women. Apart from the household survey, a few interviews with the respondents and officers in charge of different SHGs were also conducted.

Our review has informed us that in India, the status and position of women have been historically deplorable. The Indian experience of gender inequality has become more deplorable because of the combinations and permutations of economic un-freedom with caste and class rigidities. There was a fall in the status of women to an abysmally low position from a relatively high status and nobility of the Vedic times. The fall in status has led to a socio-economic and religio-cultural deprivation of women. From the womb to tomb women are victims of violence and deprivations. The vulnerability of women in rural India and that too in U.P. state is worse compared to the all India levels. Therefore, women empowerment is unthinkable in India, without the caste calculus.
Apart from this general condition of gender inequalities, the situation seems more miserable in the case of Dalit women. They are victims of a double deprivation: one, on the gender front and the other on the caste front. The Dalits form a sizeable proportion of our population. The socio-economic conditions of the vast bulk of these people have greatly deteriorated with over 70 percent estimated to be living below poverty-line as against 48 percent of the general population. The Dalits live a life of abject poverty and starvation. Wretchedness is their fate. 82.8 percent of the land of our country is owned by the caste Hindus. It is said that only a 7 percent of the land is owned by the Dalits, and among them nearly 70 percent have less than one hectare.

There is no doubt that after Independence the Government of India has undertaken several measures to improve the conditions of the Dalits. The proactive policies of Government of India for economically empower them through reservations and provisions of subsidies are very significant. Nonetheless, most of such economic policies missed the target of actually empowering the Dalit women. One of the reasons for this failure was the imperfect notion of women empowerment. The second reason lies in the process of implementation, which was highly bureaucratic and hence liable to corruption.

The concept of empowerment of women is psychological sense of personal control in the persons, domestic, social and political realms. In order to examine these problems, certain parameters of women empowerment are to be identified. In the present study, the so-called “ASHTAPATH” to empowerment is considered as the parameters of women empowerment. It is a process by which one is authorized to think, act and control resources in an autonomous way. The most critical component of women’s empowerment is found to be education. It leads to improved economic growth, low fertility rate, health and sanitation and an awareness of factors that disempower women. Work participation rate and political participation also grows with women’s education.
However, poverty, which is the root cause for educational backwardness of the scheduled caste all these years, is still the root cause today. Whatever incentives the Government has given for advancement of education among the scheduled castes have not really helped the poor scheduled castes. Poor economic conditions are still responsible for illiteracy and massive dropouts. Therefore economic empowerment assumes supreme importance in their empowerment.

Secondly, the bureaucratic mode of implementation of Governmental programmes failed to reach the target of empowering Dalit women. However, in the recent past, the SHGs have become a powerful medium for the rural women in India to advance in various fields. The SHG approach towards women empowerment is found to be highly promising and effective. SHGs of women in India have been recognized as an effective strategy for the empowerment of women especially in the rural areas. Over the years, SHGs have freed them from the clutches of moneylenders and landlords. The income-generation activities have helped them to improve their condition in nutrition, health care, and the education of their children. Thus, to a certain extent, SHGs have succeeded to provide economic freedom to the rural women folks. And this, in turn, has contributed to their improvement in terms of economic decision making, access and control over assets and resources, control over physical mobility, control over their body-sexuality, control over political sphere, widening of their intangible resources such as knowledge and information etc.

The saving and credit groups also provide a base for poor women to organization themselves expand options for livelihoods and to participate actively in development. The SHGs thus often provide a platform for women to become functionally literate, to sharpen their communication and conflict-resolution skills, and acquire skills. The empowerment of the women leads to development of the family and of the community at large.

Our field study covered various aspects of women empowerment as per the Asthapath. Accordingly, certain indicators of women empowerment such as educational profile of the respondents, monthly income of the family,
freedom of women to move freely, role of women in decision-making, proportion of women contesting in the local Government election, access to health facilities, knowledge of legal aids, childbirth in hospital, awareness about family planning, education of girl child, participation in socially useful activities, age at marriage of girls, having salaried employment for women, and availing due government benefits were examined. The analysis broadly supports our argument that SHG mediation is a powerful means to empower the powerless women and it becomes an effective medium of strengthening them economically. However, the indicators of women empowerment were found to be very low in the Non-SHG households, compared to SHG households. Moreover, within the SHG households, the level of empowerment was found better in NGO run SHG households, relative to Government SHG households. It is also found that the findings of the study have significant policy import.