Chapter 1
Introduction
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 awarding of Nobel Peace Prize of 2006 to Mr. Mohammed Yunus, the pioneer of Micro Credit and Grameen Bank has provided an international approval of the significance of SHG movement.

Dr. Radhakrishnan, the former President of India, has rightly observed: “The progress of our land cannot be achieved without active participation of our mothers, wives and daughters” (Quoted in Ushvinder, 2003: 34). “Socio-economic advancement of a country can best be judged by the status and position which it can bestow to its women” (Madhuri, 2003: 16). On a similar vein, Babasaheb Ambedkar has remarked that you can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women.
According to Swami Vivekananda, there is no chance for welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved and it is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, in his book, *India-Economic Development and Social Opportunity*, states that women’s empowerment can positively influence the lives not only of women themselves but also of men and children.

However, the status and position of women in India has 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. Therefore, women empowerment is unthinkable in India, without the caste calculus.

The division of societies into classes, based on economic and political considerations, is almost a universal phenomenon. As a natural consequence, the rich and the powerful are always at an advantage to exploit the poor and the weak, often in very subtle ways. At every phase of history we notice the human quest for liberation from socio-economic and cultural discrimination. Today, this quest for liberation has become more and more intense. Man wants to be liberated from the dehumanizing situations that prevent his growth and assert himself as the subject of his own destiny. As we survey the world situation today, we notice the struggles of the poor and the oppressed for liberation more manifest especially in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The people in these Continents want to overcome their extreme poverty and free themselves from the inhuman treatment to which they have so far been subjected.

The Indian society, however, is marked by a unique phenomenon—the socio-cultural reality known as *Caste*. In this caste-based society, inequality and hierarchical thinking permeate every aspect of the life of the people. The *Dalits*, the outcastes of society, are the most affected ones by this system. The *Dalits* are treated as non-persons and discriminated against throughout their life. Mahatma Gandhi, who taught and practised non-violence, could not remain blind to the inhuman violence perpetuated on a section of our
population, who were condemned to live outside the pale of civilization, without social amenities, made to do the dirtiest work, humiliated to the dust and treated with contempt. Even today the untouchables are looked upon with contempt everywhere in society. They are condemned to live on the fringes of society.

These Dalits or untouchable souls, irrespective of whether they are men or women, remained as subordinate citizens since several centuries, at least after introduction of Manu Smriti as Hindu code of law. These human souls were treated worse than stray animals without any fault of theirs.

It may be said that non-Dalits cannot understand the painful experiences of Dalits' oppression, and deprivation of their basic rights, especially their loss of self-respect and human dignity. To be born as Dalit especially in the rural area is to experience the worst kind of inhuman treatment because of the belief in their impurity and pollution by birth. A non-Dalit is no doubt at a disadvantage in his efforts to understand the actual situation of the Dalits.

In India, religion is widely used as a tool to preserve the oppressive structures of society. The Dalits are shunned and despised because of the religious view that people are born into a low-caste owing to the sins of their previous birth. Caste, which is deeply grounded in the Indian system, is approved of and supported by the Hindu religion. As mentioned earlier, this social evil was given a religious turn by sage Manu. In his Manusmriti, he has prescribed corporal punishment for the Dalits who defiled or polluted others. The Dalits were even forbidden to listen to the sacred texts being read.

As far as the concrete life of the Hindus was concerned, the term dharma was interpreted to mean mainly Jati-dharma i.e. the social duties, the religious obligations and the legitimate occupations for the subjection of each individual caste. The Dalits were told that their duty and way of life with a view to obtaining a higher level of existence and ultimately Mokasha, i.e., salvation from history, lay in the faithful performance of the duties of their
which were considered polluting and so they were segregated and treated as untouchables in the Hindu society. The purity of a person was inversely proportional to his involvement with matter. Those actions, which involved contact with blood or decaying matter, were considered impure. Thus those who carried out works like scavenging, tanning of leather, etc. were considered polluted beings and declared untouchables.

Religion is playing a key role in legitimizing and upholding this caste system. Mahatma Gandhi, who worked for the Dalits’ uplift, wanted to root-out this system from Indian society as well as from the Hindu religion because for him it was an expiation and penance. According to him Hinduism had committed a great sin in giving sanction to this evil, Gandhi was anxious to eradicate the caste system and purify society of that sin by any kind of vicarious penance, and if possible, by himself. Denouncing untouchability, he wrote “I abhor with my whole soul the system which has reduced a large number of Hindus to a level less than beasts” (Kumarappa, 1981: 63, 204).

The Dalits have to profess Hindu religion (or, at least, Buddhism or Sikhism) in order to get the economic benefits and political rights given under the rule of reservation. On the other hand, the Hindu society does not accept the Dalits as Hindus. The temples are closed to them; they have no role whatever in the religious sphere. The vast wealth of the temples goes to the caste Hindus, even Dalit shrines are taken up by the high castes. Economic and social dependency forces the Dalits to continue to play the servile roles assigned to them in village festivals and other rites.

Other than the division and the development of mutual repulsion, the caste system has imposed disabilities of every kind on the Dalits, resulting in tremendous psychological consequences. Low self-esteem, identity crisis, self-hate, wrong perception of the world as a hostile environment, neurotism, etc. make them suffer grievously, hindering their personality growth.

The Dalits form a major bulk of our population. According to the Census of 2001, the Dalits were 16.62 percent of the total population of India.
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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 (Seminar on Ambedkar, New Delhi 1991).

Those families, which have traditional occupations of tanning, scavenging, etc. tenaciously hold on to them. But they do not have any respect for such jobs. Given their situation of abject poverty, utter powerlessness and low social status, the Dalits are gripped by the struggle to survive and to satisfy their basic needs for food, clothing and shelter. Very often they find it immensely hard to deal with the realities of poverty and oppression. So in order to escape from their situation, in their superstitious belief, they try to appease the spirits and deities who, they think, are supposed to be responsible for their poverty and oppression. In this process the poverty and oppression they go through, are perpetuated. Joshi, commenting on the Government’s five-year plans, observes that in spite of the Constitutional directives and a number of legislative and executive measures taken by the Government, the situation of the Dalits has not improved owing perhaps to the lack of genuine support. Moreover, he stated that, the economic position of the Dalits continues to be extremely weak (Joshi, 1986).

Education plays a very important role in empowering Dalits, especially Dalit women. It can bring about a positive attitudinal change. It increases economic, social and political opportunities available to women. It reduces the fertility rate. It brings dignity, prestige, recognition and status to one’s social personality and directly influences one’s attitudes, opinions and behavior pattern.

It also is a means of reducing prejudices and discriminations in societies caused by communal and racial division. But, when we glance through the history of education in our country, we see that education was the
monopoly of the Brahmins. Probably, the Buddhists were the first to open the doors of the educational institutions to the Dalits. Whereas during the reign of the Muslims, there were no public schools nor had the Dalits any opportunity to enter schools. It was the Christian missionaries who encouraged and admitted all castes including the Dalits, to their schools.

For over 4,500 years, the Aryan culture has bulldozed and destroyed the culture of these Dalits and hence even today these people carry a marred self-image and false consciousness. The Dalits of India were the silent spectators as well as the silent actors of history. The Hindu scriptures did not allow them to read and write. They had no access to schools. During the British rule, the foreign missionaries opened schools for all castes. But in some places, because of social pressure, the missionaries had to make Dalit students sit outside the classrooms. In many places the missionaries were ordered to close down the schools opened for the education of the Dalits. Observing this sad situation, Dr. Ambedkar remarks:

Never has any society been guilty of prohibiting the mass of its people from acquiring knowledge. Never has any society punished as a crime any attempt made by the common man to acquire knowledge. Manu is the only divine lawgiver who has denied the common man the rights of knowledge. (Devasahavam. 1992: 4).

There is no doubt that after Independence, the Government of India has undertaken several measures to promote the education of Dalit children. Even today a large amount of money is set-aside for this purpose. A paper presented in a seminar on Ambedkar, gives much insight into the Dalit literacy situation. It says that there is a glaring gap between the literacy rate of Dalit and non-Dalit groups. Compared to national literacy rate of 36.23 percent, the literacy rate among the Scheduled Castes is 21.38 percent while other communities, except the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled tribes, has a literacy rate of 41.30 percent. The female literacy rate of the Dalits is abysmally low at 10.93 percent compared with 29.43 percent for women of other communities. Various reasons are given for the backwardness of the Dalit especially in
education. According to Mumtaz Ali Khan, the real cause of their educational backwardness is economic poverty.

He says that the Dalits have been denied education by the high castes who, probably fear that education will deprive the high castes of such a cheap source of labour on their land and in their factories.

Politics is major source of power. Injustice and structural violence in the area of economic resources are reflected also in the political sphere. The economically well-off become politically powerful and the economically despised become politically powerless. The Dalits often become more pawns in the game of politics. They are easy victims for vote-banks. Caste stands in the way of national unity and progress, as it is opposed to democracy and national integration.

Rajni Kothari in his book Caste in Indian Politics shows how Brahmins though a minority, dominated the Government from the very beginning:

As Brahmins entered the institutions of higher learning, the professions and the services, everywhere they formed claques from which no Brahmins were excluded. Between 1892 and 1904, out of 16 successful candidates for I.C.S. 15 were Brahmins; in 1914, 93 out of 128 permanent district Munsifs were Brahmins; in 1944, 452 out 650 registered graduate of the university were Brahmins. (Mandal Commission, 1980: 21)

This may appear as mere history and prompt us to think that after independence, especially after more than four decades of special concession and special reservation; the Dalits are fast entering the various decision-making bodies of country. But it is disheartening to note that from 1968 to 1978, according to the Mandal Commission Report, only ten candidates belonging to Scheduled Caste and Tribes got access to the I.A.S. on the basis of merit and only 6 got into I.P.S. This small but telling example reveals the full truth of the cultural lag that the deprived classes have still to make up before they are able to overcome their historical handicaps.

It is in this backdrop of socio-cultural and economic disempowerment of the Dalit communities that we should situate the question of empowerment of Dalit women. As K.M. Ali has rightly pointed out:
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 (Ali, 1991: 28-29)

Therefore, economic empowerment assumes supreme importance in their empowerment.

Today, the *Dalits* are fast awakening to recognize their human rights and dignity. They are organizing themselves to liberate themselves from the clutches of the evil of caste and oppression from the rich and the powerful. On the other hand, the caste Hindus, who are also the rich and the privileged of society, adamantly try to suppress every uprising of the untouchables and the poor in order to maintain the status quo.

To eradicate untouchability, to fight for the emancipation of the *Dalits*, especially *Dalit* women, many movements are organized today in India. Practically, every state has its own *Dalit* movements. A few contemporary movements are: *Samata Dal* in Karnataka, *Dalit* Literary Movement in Gujrat, *Dalit* Panthers in Maharasta, *Dalit* Christian Liberation Movement in Tamilnadu, *Dalit* Mahasabha in Andhra, *Bahujan Samaj* in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, etc. Most of these movements are limited to their own region and state and hence they are far from being an organized and well-coordinated political movement with an all-India organization. They have now no Charismatic leaders like Ambedkar to unify them in order to bring them to the national front.

The emerging *Dalit* organization and political parties have shown a keen interest in contesting elections to the various representative bodies. There is a growing interest among the *Dalits* to know their own history and culture, which have been destroyed or suppressed by the caste Hindus. Their protests and uprising are an unmistakable indication of the fact that the long-submerged *Dalit* consciousness is on the rise. They are becoming more and more conscious of their own inferiority- complex and slave mentality.
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Therefore, we can say that there is a tremendous awakening among the masses, and through sustained effort the many Dalit organizations and movement can function as catalysts to bring about the rapid development of the Dalits. The focus on Dalitness asserts their power not only for self-affirmation but also to bring about social change.

It is true that there have been several initiatives in the governmental and non-governmental levels to ameliorate the conditions of women, especially of Dalit women. However, none of these initiatives could successfully reach the target. Amidst this dark cloud there has been nonetheless, a silver lining. That is none other than the mediated changes in the rural India through the agencies of SHGs since the 1980s.

In the recent past, the SHGs have become a powerful medium for the rural women in India to advance in various fields. The SHG is a means by which they are able to come out of the four walls of theirs houses and share their views with other women; it has become a common platform for them to come together to discuss on various issues of social, religious, economic and cultural concerns. In SHGs, the women are able to share their problems and seek solutions. SHG seems to be a promise-filled path on the process of their empowerment. SHGs of women in India have been recognized as an effective strategy for the empowerment of women especially in the rural areas. The major concern of SHGs is the economic empowerment of women. Over the years, the women have benefited much from it. It has freed them from the clutches of moneylenders and landlords. The economically independent women have a say in their family and in society. More and more women are coming forward in the decision-making process in the family as well as in the community. The income-generation activities have helped them to improve their condition in nutrition, health care, and the education of their children.

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 bodily-
sexuality, control over political sphere, widening of their intangible resources such as knowledge and information.

The origins of SHG movement go back to the success stories of Gramin Bank Movement in Bangladesh where in the poor women in rural area were organized into micro-credit groups\(^1\). The World Bank took up this institution of micro-credit and advocated as its strategy to rural poverty alleviation in the developing countries. In India micro-credit program emerged in the 1980’s under the nodal agency of National Bank for Agricultural and Rural Development (NABARD). NABARD has encouraged both Governmental and Non-Governmental organization to start Self-Help Groups. Thus, within two decades thousands of SHGs were formed far and wide in the country through the development blocks, local Punchayats and through Non-Governmental Organization (NGOs).

1.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

It is widely argued that SHG movement is an effective strategy to empower women economically as well as socially. But, at the same time, some argue that SHG is a strategy to siphon off the incomes of the poor women through banks so that the rich can avail large quantities of bank credit and hence SHGs are beneficial only for the rich and not for the poor.

Secondly, though SHGs are being advocated as panacea for rural poverty alleviation and women empowerment, it is alleged that all the SHGs are not performing uniformly. For example, performance of governmental SHGs are said to be generally much inferior to that of some of the NGO-run SHGs. Our research focus to examine these two problems, namely, whether SHGs really contribute to women empowerment or not; and whether there is significant variation in the performance of government-run and NGO-run SHGs.

\(^1\) Grameen is the Bank of the borrowers, mostly women, started in the mid 70’s. Today it lends 30 million Dollars a month to 1.8 million needy, mostly women. In the words of Mohd. Yunus, the Nobel Peace Prize awardee for hundreds of millions of people peace comes only through poverty alleviation.
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, which is stated below:

**Ashtapath (Eight-Fold-Path) to Empowerment:**

1. *Access to and control over private assets and resources:* This means access and control over productive resources such as land, house and equipment including agricultural implants.

2. *Access to public resources:* The term public resources include the entire range of service and fundamental rights guaranteed by the state. This will encompass natural resources such as common land, forest, water and other social and economic rights such as education, health care, credit, which should be assured by the welfare state.

3. *Control over their income and labour:* This would include an opportunity to participate in productive work and more importantly to be able to decide how she would like to spend the income earned.

4. *Control over their bodily-sexuality, reproduction and physical security:* One of the most crucial aspects of gender subordination is women's lack of control over their bodies. This would include the decisions regarding the three important aspects: marriage, sexual relations and family planning.

5. *Control over physical mobility:* An important and less discussed parameter of women's status is women's control over their physical mobility. We need to assess if the women have the autonomy to move freely as individual and does she go alone or does she need an escort.

6. *Access to and control over political sphere:* The participation of women into political sphere including local self government, trade unions, federations of urban and rural poor, caste/ community associations is the most critical in recording poor relations between men and women in the public.
7. **Access to and control over intangible resources-information, influence, sense of self worth and self esteem:** Intangible resources such as information and knowledge, the skills, self-confidence, articulation though invisible are integral elements in getting access and entitlements to material resources and in asserting their rights.

8. **Position in law and their access to legal structures and redressal:** The Constitution of India guarantees right to equality to every citizen irrespective of sexes and simultaneously also makes special provisions for women. This has provided the requisite condition for their development but for empowerment to take place the women need access to the legal structure and the redressal system.

### 1.2 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

In the light of the research problem the objectives of the study may be stated as follows.

1. To examine the economic and social status of women in India, with special reference to *Dalit* women in Eastern U.P.

2. To understand the initiatives for women's empowerment in India.

3. To examine the performance of SHGs in the Socio-economic empowerment of women.

4. To compare the performance of Governmental and Non-Governmental SHGs in empowering women.

5. To provide policy suggestions for the effective mediated change for the empowerment of the *Dalit* women.

### 1.3 HYPOTHESES

1. SHGs enable Socio-economic empowerment of women.

2. There are variations in the performance and outcomes of governmental and non-governmental SHGs.
1.4 SCHEME OF THE STUDY

The present study is divided into six chapters. The first chapter is an introductory chapter that introduces the research problem, namely, the economic empowerment of Dalit women, in the broad context of socio-economic backwardness of the Dalit communities in India.

A review of the socio-economic status of women in India is taken up in Chapter 2 wherein we present the status of women in a historical perspective. It observes how the plight of women has deteriorated over the years from the noble status of Vedic times.

As the plight of Dalit women is found to be worse than the condition of women in general, the third chapter takes another review analysis of the status of Dalit women in particular. It also touches upon the emancipatory movement by Dr. Ambedkar and the strategies of the Government to empower the Dalit women.

In chapter four, the concept of women empowerment is expounded and the profile of women empowerment in India is analyzed.

Chapter five is a major analytical chapter wherein we elaborate the processes of SHG mediation in women empowerment. In the first part, the theoretical aspects are discussed and in the second part the findings of the field study are presented.

The final chapter provides the major conclusions and certain policy suggestions that emanate from the study towards an effective strategy for empowering the Dalit women in India.

1.5 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Among the different institutional interventions for empowering women, our study restricts its scope into the institutional interventions through SHGs. For this we make a comparison between women in SHG villages and non-SHG villages. Our study of non-governmental SHGs is limited to SHG run by Purvanchal Gramin Chetna Samiti (PGCS), Raghopur, Rasara, Ballia.2

2 The Purvanchal Gramin Chetna Samiti (PGCS) is an NGO, working in Ballia, Ghazipur and Mau Districts for the last 25 years to "Empower the powerless" through integral development and structural change. The major thrust of the organization is to be on organizing
1.6 METHODOLOGY

In order to examine the differential performance of SHGs in empowering Dalit women, we intend to compare the performance of Governmental SHGs and the non-Governmental SHGs run by PGCS.

The study area is selected for the villages of Rasara Block of Ballia district. The two Governmental agencies which are operating SHGs in Shingai village (Jai Suhal Dev SHGs) and Atilapura village (Rita SHGs) are selected for study. The village Rajmalpur (Jyoti Nisha SHGs) and Parsia village (Krishant SHGs) are selected as NGO SHGs operated by PGCS and Shishwar Kurd and Narni village as Non-SHG are selected for the study. The study depends mainly on primary data, collected through sample survey of households of SHG women. A sample of 15 SHG women each of the selected SHGs and a sample of 30 women from Non-SHG village were surveyed.

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