

# ROLE OF SELF HELP GROUPS IN EMPOWERING WOMEN: A Case study on Cachar District of Assam, India

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**ABSTRACT** Women have been playing a very important role in the society. Women empowerment and their status and dignity are closely connected with socio-cultural, activities in the society. In the recent years, women empowerment is a subject of mass discussion and debate all over the world. The government of India also has several policies for women empowerment and to eradicate poverty from the nation. The Self Help Group (SHG) have become one of the significant policy decisions of Central Government for empowering rural population in general and women in particular. It is believed that the policy of Central Government towards the SHGs has been working in the right direction for women empowerment and poverty eradication in India. The position of SHGs in India has remarkably changed from mere 500 groups in 1992 to 6959250 in 2009-10. In North East Region, there are around 3.24 lakh saving linked SHGs with aggregate savings of Rs. 130 crore and 1.44 lakh credit linked SHGs with credit of Rs. 796 crore. There are over 5365 numbers of SHGs in Cachar district of which over 3445 number of SHGs managed by female members. Income generating activities undertaken by Cachar District SHGs are tailoring and embroidery, weaving, pickles fruit juice and bori, piggery, poultry, fishery, local cow, Shital pati, eridi muga, can and bamboo, gotary and duckary etc.

The present study is an attempt to examine the role of the SHGs in women empowerment and poverty eradication. The study focuses on the extent of women participation in the SHGs and promoting the support mechanisms towards the improvement of their economic, social and political power.

**Key Words:** : Empowerment, Eradication of Poverty, Socio-cultural, Government Policy, Mechanism,

## Introduction:

India's population constitutes 16.7 percent of world's total population. The country has witnessed a threefold increase in population over the last five decades; however, the growth of the economy does not commensurate along with the growth of population. Therefore, a large section of the society's population has been struggling for their livelihood due to the absence of balanced growth in all the sectors of the economy. In the struggle for survival, women are the most sufferers.

Empowerment is a process of building capacity through awareness of greater participation in economic, social and political decision making procedure. Empowerment, in its simplest form means "the manifestation of redistribution of power that challenges patriarchal ideology and male dominance." (Kohli: 1997). Women empowerment process initiates for capacity building through greater participation and collective transformation. It is an active multi-dimensional practice which provides access to knowledge and resources to realise their autonomy and rights, power, position and freedom in the society and at home. Empowerment is an individual and collective process based on self-reliance, self-awareness, collective mobilisation and organisations, capacity building and external exposure and interaction.

The Self Help Group (SHG) is a small group of poor people who have voluntarily come forward to form a group for improvement of the social and economic status of the members (Sahoo: 2013). An SHG comprises 10 to 20 members. The members of the SHG agree to contribute to a common fund and use the same to achieve their objectives.

In the struggle for survival and alleviate hunger and starvation, women's are the most sufferers. They have been struggling for fulfilling their day to day basic needs like fetching water, collecting fuel and fodder, nursing their children etc. Most of the rural women have been suffering from various diseases because of undernourishment, unsafe drinking water, poor sanitation, hard work and overlook their health issues. In the present day, SHGs able to contribute towards the economic development of poor section and help them empowered economically, socially and politically. The present paper is an attempt at analysing the contribution of SHGs for the empowerment of women.

**Importance of the study:**

For smooth, equal and speedier development of all section of people, the government of India adopted five year economic plan since April 1, 1951. During this plan period, the country has manifested many fold developments. But, still, a considerable percentage of populations are living below the poverty line. This is mainly because of failure to use the human resources into the optimum level. It is realized that growth of women helps to develop her family, village and the nation. Since women constitute 48 percent of total population of India (Census: 2011), it is essential to maximise the utilisation of this human resources for the benefit of the country. SHGs have been providing the scope for employing poor women for their livelihood and empowered them to acquire their due status in the society. The present study is imperative as it reproduces the extent of help and support of SHGs towards women empowerment.

**Objectives of the Study:**

The broad objective of the study is to examine the role of SHGs in promoting women's empowerment in Cachar District of Assam, India. It has some specific objectives. They are;

- To analyse rate of women participation in SHGs.
- To find out the income generating activities of SHGs.
- To analyse economic, social and other benefits derived by the members.

**The methodology of the study:**

The study has been focused mainly on the data and information collected from Cachar district of Assam, India. For complete this study, both primary and secondary data have been in use. Primary data are collected from printed or unprinted records of Directorate of SHGs under SGSY (Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana), RBI Bulletin, Government of Assam and Government of India's website etc. Secondary data collected from different research articles, agencies, NGOs engaged in helping women empowerment etc. Information and Communication Technology have the great use of collecting different information for this paper. Collected data and information have been analysed with the help of simple statistical formula.

**The growth of the SHG in India:**

The SHG concepts were originated and developed in Bangladesh by Mohammed Yunus in the year 1957. Going through the success stories of Bangladesh, Government of India initiated to promote and supply financial help to the SHG.

NABARD initiated a search for alternative methods to fulfil the financial needs of the rural poor and informal sector and recent effort was taken to linkage the SHGs with banks in 1991-92 (Uma: 2012). The spread of SHGs in India has been phenomenal. It has made remarkable progress from mere 500 groups in 1992 to 6959250 in 2009-10. In North East Region, there are around 3.24 lakh saving linked SHGs with aggregate savings of Rs. 130 crore and 1.44 lakh credit linked SHGs with credit of Rs. 796 crore. Both National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), a centrally sponsored scheme and National Rural Livelihood Project (NRLP), World Bank Sponsored Project have been working for the formation and supplying revolving funds to SHGs. Under this projects a total 29077 no. of SHGs in 2013-14 and 10535 SHGs in 2014-15 were newly formed (Statistical Hand Book: 2015)

**SHGs in Cachar**

As per 2011 census, 81.83 percent population of Cachar district lives in rural areas, and 18.17 percent lives in urban areas. In total 315,464 people live in urban areas of which male 159,201 and female 156,263. Sex ratio in urban areas of the district is 982 female in every 1000 male. The total rural population of the district is 1,14,153 of which male 727,083 and female 694,070. Sex ratio in rural area of the district is 955 female per 1000 male. The sex ratio of girl and boy in Cachar district is 955 and 1000 respectively. Child population in the age 0-6 is 222,673 and majority of them were lives in rural areas of which male were 113,943 and female were 108730.

There are over 5365 no. of SHGs in Cachar district of which over 3445 no. of SHGs managed by female members. Income generating activities undertaken by SHGs are tailoring and embroidery, weaving, pickles fruit juice and bori, piggery, poultry, fishery, local cow, Shital pati, eridi muga, can and bamboo, gotary and duckery etc.

Table-1 **WOMEN PARTICIPATION RATE OF SHGS IN CACHAR**

Block	Total (sample SHGs)	Female SHGs	Male/Female SHGs	No. of Female Members	Percentage of Female SHGs
B-1	266	148	3	1630	53.6
B-2	184	94	4	1310	51.0

B-3	132	77	2	1190	58.0
B-4	420	226	12	2310	53.8
B-5	530	344	6	3470	64.9
B-6	430	179	64	2010	41.6
B-7	241	166	14	2390	68.9
B-8	367	290	30	3690	79.0
B-9	311	204	5	2680	65.6
B-10	436	263	16	3240	60.3
B-11	321	152	3	1920	47.4
B-12	572	456	16	5600	79.7
B-13	592	374	41	4990	63.2
B-14	163	102	5	1530	62.6
B-15	500	370	16	4870	74.0
Total	5365	3445	237	42830	64.2

Sources: Directories of SHGs of SGSY web Page.

Note: Block B1 to B15 are Banskandi, Binakandi, Borjelanga, Borkhola, Kalain, Katigorah, Lakhipur, Narsingpur, Palonghat, Rajabazar, Salchapra, Silchar, Sonai, Tapang, Udharbond respectively.

Table-1 reflects the percentage of SHGs owned by female and male member out of a total number of sample SHGs in each block of Cachar district. Cachar district has 15 blocks as stated in the table. Among the total 5365 SHGs in 15 number of blocks, block-13 have highest of 592 number and block-3 have lowest 132 number of SHGs. Block-12 have highest 456 number of SHGs owned by female members covering 79.7 percents of the total for that block while block-3 have lowest number SHGs, i.e. 77 owned by female members comprising 58 percent of the total of that block. Block-6 has a lower percentage of female SHGs with 41.6 percent in compared to male SHGs.

The table reveals that only 237 numbers of SHGs out of 5365 numbers of SHGs, i.e. 4.4 percent have male and female members' works together. The table also reveals that except two blocks, block-6 & 11, female SHGs outshine male SHGs. In three blocks (B-8, B-12 & B-15) have more than 70 percent SHGs are owned by female members. It is observed that the blocks which are more developed having lower male participation. This is mainly because of the male population in such blocks are engaged in service and employment sector.

Table: 2  
CAST WISE DISTRIBUTION OF FEMALE SHGS

Block	Female SHGs	General(%)	SC/ST/OBC(%)	Minority(%)
B-1	148	7	3	90
B-2	94	86	14	-
B-3	77	70	28	2
B-4	226	40	15	45
B-5	344	40	17	43
B-6	179	6	45	44
B-7	166	38	27	45
B-8	290	35	29	36
B-9	204	40	40	20
B-10	263	52	46	2
B-11	152	55	35	10
B-12	456	40	30	30
B-13	374	30	58	12
B-14	102	45	40	15
B-15	370	42	30	28
Total	3445	42	29	29

Source: Directories of SHGs of SGSY web Page

Table 2 reveals that in all blocks except one all cast people are represented in SHGs though their participation rate is not equal. For this study, different categories people are divided into General, SC/ST/OBC and Minority. Participation of general category member is 42 percent while minority's members' participation rate is about 29 percent. ST/SC & OBC has lower participation rate than any other categories. ST/SC & OBC together comprise about 29 percent of total female members. Table expose that

minority members dominate block-1 with 90 percent of their participation and block-2 is dominated by general members while block-13 has ST/ST & OBC majority.

The SHGs members perform various income-generating activities. Table 3 highlights the some of the significant activities of SHGs and their economic status.

Table-3  
INCOME GENERATION ACTIVITIES RUN BY SHGS OF CACHAR  
(6-year data)

Activities	Working Capital Investment (Rs)	Total income generated (Rs)	Total Profit (Rs)	Return on Working Capital Employed (%)
Tailoring & Embroidery	65380	98789	33409	51.1
Weaving	56755	93200	36445	64.2
Pickles Fruit Juice & Bori	55832	83000	27168	48.7
Handicraft	73900	112000	38100	51.5
Piggery	55000	90560	35560	64.6
Poultry	61000	110000	49000	80.3
Fishery	125000	170300	45300	36.2
Total	492867	757849	264982	53.7

Source: Case Study of 110 sample SHGs of Cachar (Roy, Alom: 2015)

The table reveals that amongst the total working capital investment, highest amount invests in a fishery while lowest amount invested in handicraft activities. Though, the highest amount invested in fishery, return on capital is not satisfactory as compared to other ventures. It recorded lowest earning on working capital invested during the study period. Poultry is recorded the most profitable venture with 80.3 percent of profit and Piggery is the second largest revenue earning venture (in ratio). While income generating rate of SHGs is 153.7 percent over working capital invested, the overall return on working capital employed is 53.7 percent on the total working capital invested.

#### Women Empowerment through SHGs:

The progress of a nation is inevitably related to the economic and social status of women. It is well known fact that, women are more responsible for managing and administering the household chorus ranging from child care to other household activities. Participating with SHGs, women can bring fortunate changes and improved their living conditions. SHG provides scope for needy women to come together voluntarily and join in development and income generated activities thereby ensuring economic independence. It brings group perception among women, inviting a sense of belongingness and self-confidence. As a result, what she cannot accomplish as an individual, can achieve as a member of the group with sufficient understanding of her civil, economic, and political rights, role and functions and responsibilities as a dignified member of the society. The role of SHGs in empowering women can be underline as follows;

- Mobilize resources of the individual members for their collective economic development and uplifting livelihood.
- Developed saving habit and individual skill for utilisation of locally available resources for their source of revenue.
- Identify, analyse and find out the solution that the group members faced.
- Act as a media for socio-economic development.
- Gain mutual understanding, developed trust and self-confidence and leadership qualities to build up teamwork.
- Use an effective channel for credit and recovery of loan.
- Practical use of different government schemes and projects.

When women joined as a member of SHGs, her public participation, perspective towards social works and belongingness, self-esteem and self-respect etc. will not only increase but also enlarged her democratic, economic, social, cultural and political sphere of life.

#### Conclusion:

The concept of group formation is the best strategy to provide credit and the necessary psychological support for self-employment, particularly for poor women. SHG helps to overcome the negative social pressure and gender biases on women, overcome the mistake and guide each other. Group activism

increased awareness and reduced the chances of exploitation amongst the members. Women are benefited through SHGs in following ways:

**Economic benefit:** The status of women is dependent on their financial conditions. Participation in economic activities increases earnings and access to credit which in turn empowered them.

**Social benefits:** SHGs bring out the women from four walls of the home and aware them about their rights, role and significance in the development of the family and the society. Freedom of express, social interaction with groups and outsiders, eagerness to fight against injustice and control from male dominance are the indicators of social empowerment.

**Political and legal benefits:** SHGs provides scope for acquiring political and legal knowledge. Women members get opportunities for joining in the political process at the grass root level. It helps to solve the local problems like drinking water, education and health, child development and other social security measures for aged and disabled.

**Community development:** SHGs members work for the community development by imposing various conditions to be maintained in the best interest to safeguard the community norms. Generate awareness for health and environmental protection and social issues leading to an improved lifestyle.

**Capacity building and freedom of mobility:** SHGs have linked with technical institutions which facilitate the members to acquire training on managerial and product quality development. Members perceive to have more freedom of mobility and can manage most of the outdoor activities without any hindrance from family members.

From the above discussion it is clear that concept of SHG for empowering women have been moving forward direction. SHGs able to attract a large section of poor people especially rural women, for participation in different socio-cultural, political and economic activities and improved their livelihood. However, there is a need and scope for further improving this idea as a mission to cover more numbers of women. Central and State government, as well as District Administration, should chalk out new schemes to help the SHG members financially and by providing training depending on local needs. The bank should adopt simple and speedy process for sanctioning loan so that beneficiaries should not face any problem for raising funds.

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