

Role Of Shgs in Political Empowerment of Women: A Study in Khordha District of Odisha

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Abstract— In the process of development of the countries all over the world, the empowerment of women has become one of the central issues and has involved a complex of the progressive changes at the individual, contextual/collective and relational level. Empowerment of women implies developing them as more aware individuals, who are politically autonomous, economically self-reliant, and are in a position to take decision on matters affecting them. That apart, the Self Help Groups approach has enabled the women members to be at a common platform for gaining and sharing their cognition and expertise in managing the affairs in relation to political and fiscal issues and thereby to persuade their co-members for raising their voices in their own groups and also externally. The present study is based on the WSHG members of five blocks of Khordha district in Odisha. The researchers adhered to descriptive research design as the same suited well to the purpose of present study. The present investigation attempted on examining the role of SHGs in political empowerment of their members so as to capacitate them to exercise their voting rights, to possess political aspiration for contesting elections, to have access to political information, to be aware of political issues and political developments, to be motivated towards political participation etc. The findings of the present study revealed that cent per cent WSHG members exercise their voting rights and an overwhelming majority of them possesses political aspiration for contesting elections, and have access to political aspiration and aware of political issues and political development, take part in different groups and involve in election campaign or meetings, participate in Gram Sabha meeting and involve in capacity building. Thus, the role of SHGs in politically empowering women is substantiated.

Keywords: Political awareness, political participation, decision making, political aspiration, voting right

I. INTRODUCTION

Evolved within the course of development discourse and thereafter as the potent tool for women upliftment, the concept of empowerment has swept the world's thinking to strengthen the women resources since 1980s. Originating from the idea of Brazilian educationist Paulo Freire, the term empowerment is most often used to describe the process wherein the powerless gain a greater share of control over resources and decision making and since women are construed to be the most powerless members, women empowerment is conceived as the welfare access conscientisation and participation of women in societal affairs. As an alternative strategy to tackle the problems of women's subjugation and segregation by providing her with the position, power and share in the process of national building empowerment ensures women of both equality and emancipation and ultimately satisfies her urge for exerting influence and control.

In the process of development of the countries all over the world, the empowerment of women has become one of the central issues and has involved a complex of the progressive changes at the individual, contextual/collective and relational level. At the individual level it aims at providing the powerless with self confidence, self esteem, sense of agency and the sense of dignity. At the contextual/collective level, empowerment presupposes group identity, sense of collective agency, group dignity, self organization and management. The relational level encompasses the ability to negotiate, communicate and gather support and ability to defend rights and sense of self in relationship and dignity.

An analysis of different models of empowerment as developed by different theorists reveals that whereas Longwe (1995) provides the idea of the process of welfare, access, conscientisation, participation and control as an integrative approach to women's empowerment. Rowlands (1997) insists upon a power relation framework as he feels that power should be deposited from four dimensions, such as power from within, power to, power over and power with women to make empowerment realistic. On the other hand Chen (1997) presupposes that empowerment can be attained by a change model comprising, (i) Material change facilitated by income which can increase the security of women (ii) Perceptual change increasing women's self-esteem, and respected by the family, community and society, (iii) Relational changes stimulated by changing the equation of the women with their surrounding members. Osmani (2005) takes a positional approach by judging women's empowerment

in terms of her position she occupies in the family and society along with her interest in the public affairs as well as her question of contribution to the society.

Empowerment of women implies developing them as more aware individuals, who are politically autonomous, economically self-reliant, and are in a position to take decision on matters affecting them. As a concept, women's empowerment was introduced at the International Conference in 1985 at Nairobi. The empowerment was defined at the conference as 'redistribution of social power and control of resources in favour of women'. The conception of 'women and development' found its way for the first time in the Sixth Five Year Plan (1980-85). The thrust got shifted from 'development to empowerment' through the Eighth Five Year Plan (1992-97). The Government of India declared the year 2001 as 'Women's Empowerment Year'.

In the year 2001, which is declared as the Women's Empowerment Year, the government takes note of the previous plans and policies, result of laws and movements, found out the launches and framed a policy for the empowerment of women.

1. Creating an environment through positive economic and social policies for full development of women, to enable them to realize full potential.
2. The enjoyments of all human rights and fundamental freedom by women on equal basis with men in all spheres-political, social, economic, cultural and civil.
3. Equal participation and decision-making of women in social, political and economic life of the nation.
4. Equal access of women to health care, quality of education at all levels, career and vocational guidance, employment and equal remuneration, occupational health and safety by social security, public office etc.
5. Strengthening the legal system, aimed at elimination of all sorts of discrimination against women.
6. Changing societal attitudes and community practices by active participation and involvement of both men and women.
7. Building and strengthening partnership with the society-particularly women's organization (Mission Shakti website)
The mission for empowerment of women consolidating the existing self help groups and facilitating organization of new self help groups, which the Government of Orissa has resolved to constitute, has been called as "Mission Shakti". This has been launched since 08.03.2021. As of today, there is need to promote and strengthen the self help groups for women, because it empowers women at the grass – root level. The constitution of mission-Shakti is of prime importance.
 - The goal mission is to develop a client-management, client-controlled and client owned micro-finance during the Mission period from 2001-2005.
 - To enlist the cluster or federation of SHGs for future impact assessment, to create a resource team in each district to develop capacity building material including audio-visual for all level.
 - To initiate conducive environment in the districts so as to involve at least 80% women in the SHG movement by the year 2005. It is provided to have a high level steering committee headed by the Chief Minister of Orissa and High Level executive to the Mission and B. D. Os at the district and block levels.

Self Help Groups play a vital role in rural development in general and for rural women in particular. The group approach made available the collective wisdom and combined resources for any task. This system has been functional in countries like Bangladesh, Malaysia, Korea, Philippines and Indonesia. In India the banking sector has formally accepted SHGs as eligible entities for development of credit. The success of SHG financing is based upon "Self Trust and self help".

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Nelapude and Nirmala Mani (2022) attempted in examining assessed the impact of Self Help Groups on the political empowerment of Scheduled Caste women through political participation in the West Godavari District of Andhra Pradesh. Their sample consisted of 240 respondents, 20 each from 12 villages of Bhimabharam and Narsanpuram divisions of West Godavari District. The assessment of political assessment of empowerment of women was made on the basis of some selected indicators. The researchers observed that the Self Help Groups have considerably assisted women members to get themselves empowered politically. After being economically self-dependent on account of their involvement in income generating occupations, such as poultry, piggery, traditional food processing and the like, the Women Self Help Groups members built up their confidence which they lacked beforehand. Therefore, it may be stated that their earnings per mensem, expenses for food and non-food items went on increasing to a considerable extent during their post-membership period in the Self-Help Groups. Rise in their economic status has not only resulted in empowering them fiscally, but also politically. As a sequel, they could

build their confidence in the process of decision making in regard to political affairs and make others aware of expressing their viewpoints. Their investigation also evinced that by taking part in forming and managing their respective Self-Help Groups these Scheduled Caste women members availed themselves of the privilege of access to various organizational set ups in different political bodies. That apart, the Self Help Groups approach has enabled these women members to be at a common platform for gaining and sharing their cognition and expertise in managing the affairs in relation to political and fiscal issues and thereby to persuade their co-members for raising their voices in their own groups and also externally. Another salient revelation of the investigation is that the women members have been influenced by the Self-Help Groups during their post-joining period to become politically empowered after raising their family's educational status and also due to exposure to mass media in an affirmative manner. On the basis of such findings of the study, the researchers arrive at the conclusion that the Self-Help Group can be an efficient mechanism for political empowerment in the countryside of our nation.

Panda and Nayak (2018) evince political empowerment as the sine qua non of the comprehensive empowerment progression. It has always reviewed as a remarkable track to women's empowerment and their participation in the decision making procedure which enables them to take control and ownership of their choices. It not only creates awareness among them, but also capacitates them to build their own confidence, signifying harnessing their power. As a result, women strive towards obtaining dignity and satisfaction of life and self respect. Being empowered, these women assert their rights and social responsibilities. They could be able to challenge the existing power relations and could gain greater control over the sources of power. The researchers focused on political empowerment of women in Odisha through Self-Help Groups and held that the Self-Help Groups have great impact on political diversions. The indicators, the researchers took into account in that regard were Self- Help Group women's membership in other sister organizations their participation in Gram Sabha, participation in the selection of local self governments and occupying posts in different committees of the PRI system, participation in the decision making process in a democratic manner and being instrumental in conflict resolution within their own group. After examining the indicators cited above, the light of the Self Help Groups members of Odisha, the researchers arrived at the conclusion that the women Self-Help Group members, all over Odisha, have vibrantly participated in various political activities, such as attending electoral meetings, taking part in campaign and also participating in very many pressure groups. Their active participation in the Gram Sabha meetings also indicated political empowerment and enhanced their political education.

Mishra (2015) visualizes that women members of the Self-Help Groups are construed to be the target groups of the political party leaders to woo them in favour of their respective political parties. As a result, political mobilization occurs informally among women in the political arena. The latest function of such maneuvering. On the contrary, it is evinced in terms of a tactical attempt to induct them in to their own political system, so as to make them politically active. Political nexus and expanse are inextricably intertwined. The political leaders leave no stone unturned to utilize the Women Self-Help Groups as the expanse for manipulation in favour of their respective parties. This process occurs vibrantly in case the political party is a ruling one on account of the fact that the members become instrumental in swaying the voters in favour of the political parties. That apart, the political leaders take the opportunity of picking up of the women's Self-Help Groups for political demonstration, conference, meeting and party activities. The members of the Self Help Groups also act as the via media of many a policy, programme and idea with the electorate. The ruling parties also promote and implement many a welfare scheme through these women members in an informed manner. On the contrary, as a matter of reciprocation, these women members are rewarded in terms of easy loan from the banking sectors and cooperative bodies and also promotion of processed goods in the meetings.

Sahu and Tripathy (2005) were of the opinion that seventy per cent of the globe were penury haunted. Their accessibility to the banks for availing themselves of the facilities is significant not only from the point of view of eradication of penury but also from the angle of maximizing their contribution to regional development for boosting the national economy. The Self-Help Groups have appeared to be instrumental in accelerating the process of participatory development which in turn brings women's empowerment. Their economic participation ultimately results in political empowerment. The authors believe that although women in the countryside constitute a marginalized group in our social system on account of societal and fiscal impediments and even though they continue to remain backward and occupy a position in the lower stratus of the society and belong to the nadir of social hierarchy, there is every possibility that these women member can uplift themselves from the pangs of penury and stalemate and thereby raise their social, political as well as fiscal status through micro-credit and formation of Self-Help Groups.

III. OBJECTIVES

As the present investigation attempted on studying the role of SHGs in political empowerment of their members so as to capacitate them to exercise their voting rights, to possess political aspiration for contesting elections, to have access to political information, to be aware of political issues and political developments, to be motivated towards political participation etc., the following objectives were formulated accordingly.

1. To know whether or not the Women SHG members are exercising their voting rights.
2. To find out the motivators of the respondents motivating them towards exercising voting rights.
3. To cognize the basis of selection of candidates while casting vote.
4. To have information regarding the Women SHG members' feeling regarding the politicization of Gram Sabha and other Government programmes.
5. To be acquainted with the views of members' regarding factors responsible for politicization.
6. To cognize the respondents' political aspiration for contesting the elections (if given a chance).
7. To know respondents' access to political information/awareness regarding political issues and political development.

IV. RESEARCH METHOD

Any piece of research is grounded on appropriate procedure and proper tools and techniques of collection of data from the informants. The analysis and interpretation of data should keep in touch with the latest developments in the field of investigation. The modus operandi of the present investigation has been designed accordingly.

The researchers have adopted descriptive research design with a view to obtaining complete and appropriate information. The procedural steps are accurately planned. The study has also been reasonably well-founded on collecting data from Women SHG members of five blocks such as Khordha, Bhubaneswar, Jatni, Begunia and Tangi Blocks of Khordha district of Odisha by adopting purposive as well as convenience sampling and accordingly primary data have been gathered from three hundred respondents. The researchers have left no stone unturned in ensuring to dispel sampling bias and making the sampled units representative of the research universe. Data have been gathered on the basis of interview. Frequency distribution and percentage analysis have been carried out to arrive at meaningful conclusion.

V. FINDING AND ANALYSIS

The Self-Help Groups are no more considered just as same beneficiaries of many a government sponsored scheme, rather institutions with bargaining power which have been very well realized by the political parties. A large number of Self-Help Groups have embarked on advocating for their rights and through pressure groups have forayed into activations while sustaining livelihoods. Their strong social networks make them essential to political parties because of the multiplier and demonstration effects that help further consolidate the women vote bank. At this backdrop, the researcher deemed it proper to collect information from the respondents regarding exercise of their voting rights, motivating factors of their exercise of voting rights, basis of selection of candidates while casting vote, their feeling regarding politicization of Gram Sabha and other Government programmes, factors responsible for politicization etc. Data collected regarding the same are shown in the following tables.

Table- 1

Showing Exercise of Voting Rights by SHG Members

Sl No	Exercise of Voting Rights	Frequency	Percentage
1	Yes	300	100%
2	No	Nil	Nil
	TOTAL	300	100%

The above table shows that 100% of the respondents exercised their voting rights and no one failed to cast her vote.

After cognizing the exercise of voting rights by the SHG members and finding out cent percent of positive response the researcher attempted on knowing the motivators towards exercise of voting right. The same has been shown in the following table.

Table- 2**Showing Motivators Infusing in the SHG Members the Exercise of Voting Right**

SI No	Motivators	Frequency	Percentage
1	Husband/ Family members		
	Media	121	40.33%
2	Ex-representatives	21	7%
3	Political parties/ workers/leaders	32	10.66%
4	Self	76	25.33%
5		50	16.66%
	TOTAL	300	100%

As regards the motivators for infusing in the SHG members the exercise of voting rights. In majority of cases, (40.33%) the husbands were the motivators, followed by the political parties/ workers/ leaders (25.33%) self (16.66%) representatives (10.66%) and media (7%) respectively.

While casting votes in favour of particular candidate, the major consideration has always been the basis of selection of the candidate. The voters' choice has never been the same as they consider the contestants from various points of view. Data in the regard are tabulated below:

Table- 3**Basis of Selection of Candidate While Casting Vote**

SI No	Basis	Frequency	Percentage
1	Good personality	12	4%
2	Access to rural development	63	21%
	Ex- representative		
3	Educational background	81	27%
4	Financial status	12	4%
5	Other Reasons (self-interest, family relationship, party in power etc..)	33	11%
6		109	36.33%

The above table shows that the basis of selection of candidates while casting vote by the SHG members indicated that in majority of cases (36.33%) it was for the reasons, like self-interest following by ex-representatives (27%), access to rural development, education (11%) and good personality (4%).

Democracy entails people's control over collective decisions. But the involvement of people in decision making process requires active and informed citizens. However, liberal democracy postulated that the consent of electorates expressed through periodic elections is sufficient for the functioning of democracy and ensured accountability of the Government. Gram Sabha characterized as an institution of direct democracy through which people participate in the decision- making process in conformity with the 73rd Amendment. But unfortunately, the term Gram Sabha is considered to be a meeting, though the Constitution defines it as an association of voters. There is a dire need to improve the quality of deliberation within Gram

Sabha so as to make them truly inclusive, through smaller group discussions and workshops rather than large meetings which tend to get dominated by vocal and powerful mobs, the ruling party in particular. Keeping this in view it was considered pertinent to collect data regarding the respondents' feelings of politicization, if any. The same are shown below:

Table- 4**Feeling Regarding the Politicization of Gram Sabha and Other Govt. Programmes**

SI No	Feeling	Frequency	Percentage
1	Yes	280	93.33%
2	No	20	6.66%
	TOTAL	300	100%

The table shown above clearly indicated that a vast majority of respondents(93.33%) felt that there has been politicization of Gram Sabha and other Governmental programmes, contrary to a meager 6.66% who negated it.

With reference to the supra, data were collected regarding the factors responsible for politicization which are shown below:

Table- 5**Factors responsible for politicization**

SI No	Basis	Frequency	Percentage
1	Influence of local leaders		
	Incentives	190	67.85%
2	Conflict	12	4.28%
3	Self-interest of leaders	12	4.28%
4	Hereditary Politics Other reasons	46	15.33%
5		18	6.42%
6		2	0.71%
	TOTAL	280	100.00%

As regarded the factors responsible for politicization, our study revealed that a large majority of respondents (67.85%) held the influence of local leaders responsible for it, followed by Self-interest of leaders (15.33%), hereditary politics (6.42%) incentives and conflict (4.28% each).Other reasons accounted for 0.71% only.

VI. POLITICAL ASPIRATION AND AWARENESS

After Pramila Bisoyi, a representative for Mission Shakti, the pioneer of women's self-help groups in the state and an advocate for participation of each and every woman in civil society and a part and parcel of the microfinance movement in Odisha for more than two decades, was elected as the Member of Parliament from Aska constituency, the political aspiration of every SHG member has been enkindled. Her success story both in the SHG and Indian politics has not only amazed all, but also raised a hope among the women SHGs members of the state to aspire for contesting elections at different levels, starting from the Gram Panchayat and ending with the highest temple of democracy, i.e. the Parliament of India.

Keeping the supra in view, the researcher deemed it proper to collect information from the respondents regarding their political aspiration for contesting elections, provided they are given the opportunity.

Table:- 6**Showing the Respondents Political Aspiration for Contesting Elections (If given a chance)**

SL NO	ASPIRATION TO CONTEST	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
1	Yes	252	84%
2	No	48	16%
	TOTAL	300	100

The above table clearly indicates that vast majority of the respondents (84%) are having aspiration for contesting elections, if given a chance for the same. Only (16%) of them declined to contest.

Political information/ awareness is an important tool for cognizing the political process of democratic states. It has got a nexus with political participation. Political awareness has always been appreciated as among several significant variables while taking a decision regarding an individual's political participation. Data in this regard were collected from the respondents and the same are analyzed in the following table.

Table- 7

Showing Respondents' Access to Political Information/ Awareness Regarding Political Issues and Political Development

N=300

Access to Political information	260 (86.66%)	40 (13.33%)
Awareness regarding political issues/ development	270 (90%)	30 (10%)

It is observed in the above table that a vast majority of the members of women's SHGs under investigation in the present study had access to political information barring a meager 13.33% of the total number of respondents who responded in negative terms. In the like manner, it was also revealed in the above table that an overwhelming number of respondents (270 or 90%) were aware of the political issues and development in their own locality or state or their country.

VII. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF MEMBER OF SHG

The genuine participation of all citizens is indicated by the exercise of the right to vote and to be elected as a fundamental democratic principle. Yet, persons with intellectual or social disabilities are often excluded from political processes. The induction of women, youth and persons with disabilities into political participation has greatly improved over the years, although the progress remains uneven. The balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision making is essential for justice and democracy.

Keeping the supra in view, the researcher embarked on gathering data from the respondents relating to their involvement in election campaign/ meetings, participation in different pressure groups, participation in Gram Sabha Meeting, involvement in solving problems related to women and community, involvement in capacity building etc. The data so collected are tabulated below.

Table:- 8

Political participation of members of SHGs

N=300

SI No	Nature of Participation	Frequency	Percentage
1	Participation in different pressure groups	182	60.66%
	Involvement in election campaign/ meetings		
2	Participation in Gram Sabha Meeting	231	77%
	Involvement in solving problems related to women/ community		
3	Involvement in capacity building	242	80.66%

4		221	73.66%
5		162	54%

The above table clearly reveals that the respondents overwhelmingly participate in different arenas of political participation. A large majority of them (60.66%) participated in different pressure groups. More than that (77%) participate in election campaign/ meetings and still greater number of respondents (80.66%) participate in Gram Sabha Meetings. The above table also shows that a large number of respondents are involved in solving women related/ community related problem. Their involvement in capacity building is no less (54%).

VIII. CONCLUSION

Women's equal participation in sharing power and taking decisions in an active manner in the political process at every stage should be protected for achieving the objective of empowerment as political empowerment enables women to the control the scheme of things that deliver the benefits for their fiscal and societal development (Panda and Nayak, 2018). Their power has increased in the process of decision making (Sahu, 2013). It is beyond suspicion that promotion of Women's Self Help Groups provides them with a rostrum so as to assist the women members to surmount their societal impediments concerning lack of access to decision making and political participation (Rath, 2022). The Self-Help Groups, on the basis of their microcredit programmes, have been perceived as consequential contrivance of empowerment of women in the countryside of Odisha (Mohanty et al., 2013). The findings of the present study that cent per cent WSHG members exercise their voting rights and an overwhelming majority of them possess political aspiration for contesting elections, and have access to political aspiration and aware of political issues and political development, take part in different groups and involve in election campaign or meetings, participate in Gram Sabha meeting and involve in capacity building clearly indicate that they have become politically empowered after joining their respective Self Help Groups. Thus, the role of SHGs in politically empowering women is substantiated. Simultaneously, such findings of the present study are also corroborated by the earlier studies cited above.

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