



Women's Empowerment through Microfinance: A Study of Selected Self Help Groups of Cooch Behar District, West Bengal

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ABSTRACT

It becomes obvious that the development of a country to its fullest level would not be possible until there is proper development both in the urban and also in the rural areas, in terms of both economic and social development. Rural India has been facing problems related to poverty, lack of health care, illiteracy, lack of skill etc. These issues are too big to handle on an individual basis; it would be better to address if treated as a group. Self-help groups are the medium by which these issues are addressed in order to assist the underprivileged and marginalized. Through Self Help Groups, the underprivileged and marginalized join together to address their problems. The main goal of this study is to investigate and assess the state of women's empowerment in the Cooch Behar district of West Bengal via Self-Help organizations and the socio-political transformations that these organizations' members have accomplished.

Introduction

Micro-credit or Microfinance has extended the banking services giving credits and different financial assistances to the socially and economically marginalised poor rural people of the society of various countries. Microfinance is a financial service of small quantity provided by the financial institutions to the poor (Sarkar and Dhar, 2011). This is being practised as a tool to tackle poverty in various countries. A significant work has been done over the last twenty year in the development and to test various

microfinance concepts and strategies to give the impoverished access to financial services to the underprivileged through Non-Governmental Organisations, Co-operatives and Banks.

'Micro' basically means small, but the taskforce has not specified the precise amount of credit. However, in India, borrowing up to Rs. 25000 may be considered as a microcredit product, according to the Reserve Bank's Micro Credit Special Cell. Eventually, this sum may be progressively extended to Rs. 40000 over time. Consequently, women may experience an increased ability to transform their choices into desired actions, which would lead to the emergence of economic political, social, and psychological empowerment outcomes (Eyben, Kabeer & Cornwall, 2008).

The United Nations defines microfinance institutions as organizations that offer small-financial services like saving, credit and other essential financial services to the marginalised and low-income group people. Microfinance through self help groups have become a popular and positive tool to combat poverty for uplifting the social-economic status of the populace living in rural areas with particular focus to female populace. Women have always been deprived economically and socially in India especially in the rural areas. In spite of Government efforts, they have been ignorant in the financial sectors. Microfinance has been a useful tool for empowering the rural women population. It changes the life of the poor women by providing financial security as well as acts as guide in entrepreneurial development (Christabell, 2009). According to NABARD microfinance as a "provision of thrift, credit and other financial services and products of very small amounts to the poor in rural, semi-urban and urban provided to customers to meet their financial needs; with only qualification that (1) transactions value is small and (2) customers are poor."

SHGs in rural India have become a source of inspiration for Women Empowerment. The pain and suffering of the females of poverty stricken families in rural India has a long standing episode of tyranny. For improvement of those poor rural females, poverty eradication with the full involvement of them in self development process is the best engine of growth (Lalnehzovi, 2007).

In addition to providing unemployed people, especially women, with ample of scope for employment, Self-Help Groups (SHGs) also provide excellent chances for them to use their spare time to generate revenue. Associating with Self-Help Groups (SHGs) not only gives them a chance to make a living, but it also gives them a platform to practice making decisions by boosting their confidence from being economically independent and to work democratically. Therefore, the Self Help Group is silent positive

movement of development of the marginalised females within a short span in the rural credit delivery system in many parts of the world (Suguna, 2006).

Objectives

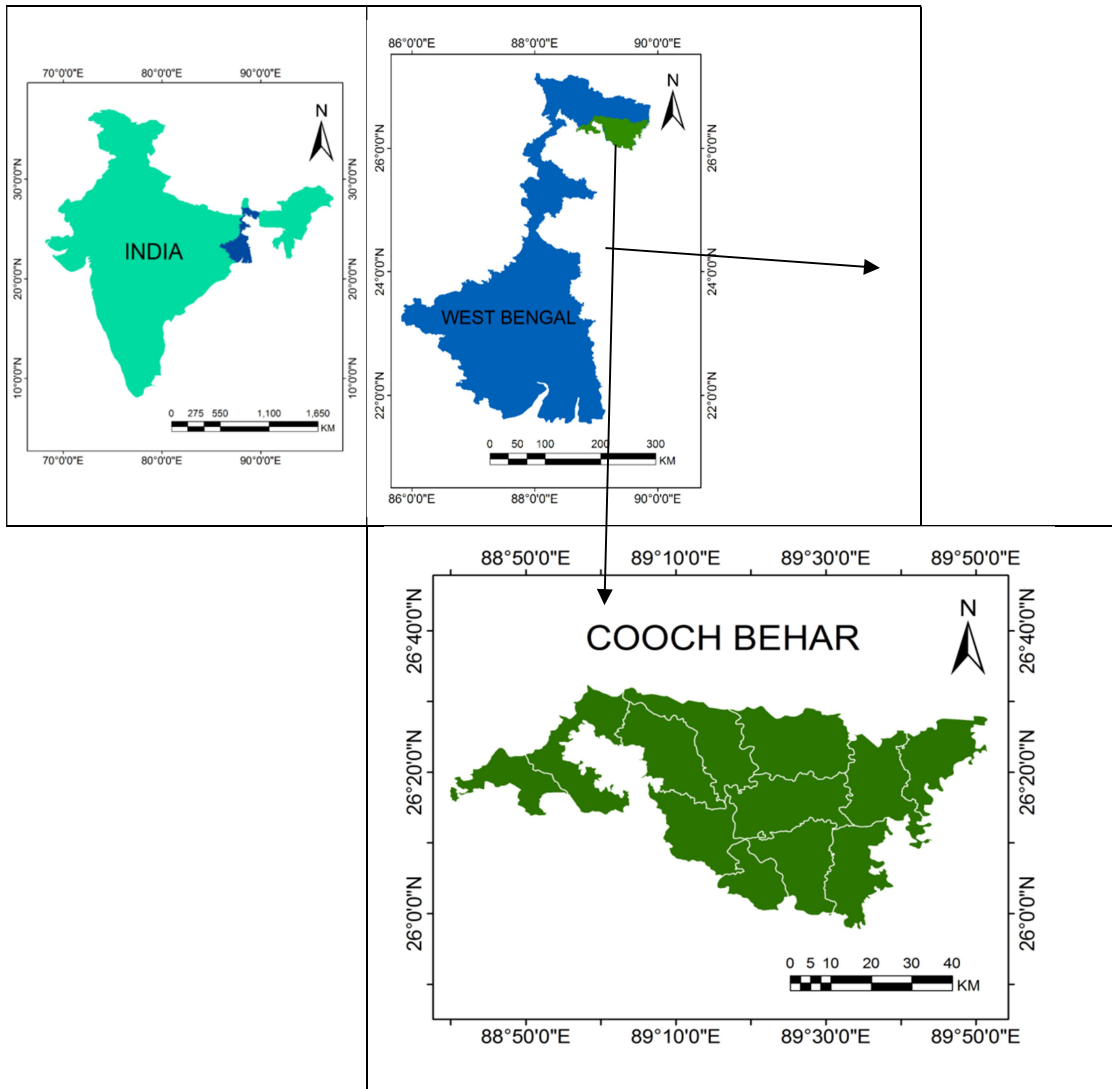
This paper attempts to analyse the microfinance initiative programmes of SHGs in the district of Cooch Behar of West Bengal. The following are the paper's specific objectives:

- To evaluate the role of (SHGs) in Cooch Behar district.
- To ascertain the motivations behind joining the SHGs
- To highlight the demographic and social-economic profile of the members of SHGs.
- To compare the level of social-economic, political and condition of the women before and after joining the Self-Help Groups (SHGs).
- To make a few recommendations to improved Self Help Group management.

Methodology

This paper aims to investigate the socioeconomic, political, and women's empowerment in the district of Cooch Behar through microfinance and self-help groups. The study has made use of both primary and secondary data.

Interviews with structured and unstructured questionnaires with the member of the Self-Help Groups (SHGs) were conducted in the villages namely Salbari, Mallikhola, Paschim Rampur, Nishiganj, Sitkimari. Data was also collected from different journals, books, relevant documents from different government office, websites etc.



About the Study area

The district of Cooch Behar is situated in the northeastern region of the state of West Bengal, between latitudes $25^{\circ}57'N$ and $26^{\circ}32'N$ and longitudes $88^{\circ}47' E$ and $89^{\circ}54' E$. The districts of Alipurduar in the north, Bangladesh to the south, Assam to the east, and Jalpaiguri in the west surrounds Cooch Behar. The district covers an total area of $3,386 \text{ km}^2$ with a population density of 833 people per km^2 with 28,227,80 people living there according to the 2011 census report. There are. Cooch Behar, Tufanganj, Mekhliganj, Dinhata, Haldibari, Mathabhanga, are the district's principal towns.

Reasons for joining the SHGs in the Study area

The causes for joining the Self Help Groups in the survey area show that out of 150 respondents, 44% joined Self Help Groups to start business, 24.67% joined to get loan, 14% joined to increase their social status and 17.33% joined for other reasons (Table-1)

Table 1: Reasons for Being a Member of Self Help Groups by the Members

Sl. No.	Causes	No. of Respondent	%
1	For get Loan	37	24.67
2	For starting business	66	44
3	For increase social status	21	14
4	Various other reasons	26	17.33

Source: Field Survey

Table 2: Respondents according to Caste

Sl No				
1	SC	ST	Others	Total
	39	03	108	150

Source: Field Survey

A total of 150 respondents were taken for the study, out of which, 108 were from other caste followed by 39 belonging to SC and remaining 03 belonging to ST caste (Table-2)

Table 3: Distribution according to age groups

SL. No.							
1	Below 20 years	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	Above 60 Years	Total
	14	32	43	35	18	8	150

Source: Field Survey

Regarding the distribution of respondents by age, 14 were below the age of 20 years, 32 belong to 21-30 years, 43 belong to 31-40 years, 35 belong to 41-50 years, 18 belong to 51-60 years and the remaining 8 belong to above 60 years (Table-3)

Table 4: Religion Composition of Respondents

Sl No					
1	Hindu	Muslim	Christian	Others	Total
	102	40	2	6	150

Source: Field Survey

While interacting with the respondent, it was found that 102 of them were Hindus, 40 were Muslims, 6 belong to other religions and the remaining 2 belong to Christian religion (Table-4).

Table 5: Respondent distribution based on educational background

Sl. No.							
		Illiterate	Class I-IV	Class V-X	Graduate and above	Others	Total
1		60	37	43	8	2	150
2	%	40%	24.67 %	28.67 %	5.33 %	1.33 %	100%

Source: Field Survey

Table-5 shows that 40% of the respondents out of 150 respondents were illiterate, 28.67 % of the respondents have studied from class V- X, 24.67% have educational background with I-IV, 5.33% were graduate and above and 1.33% belong to ‘Others’ Category.

Table -6: Main Occupation of the Respondents

Sl. No.	Occupation	Number	Percentage (%)
1	Cultivators	34	22.67
2	Agricultural Labour	57	38
3	Services	15	10
4	Self Employed	5	3.33
5	Household Industrial Workers	10	6.67

6	Others	29	19.33
7	Total	150	100

Source: Field Survey

Table-6 indicates that most of the participants (38%) were Agricultural Labours, followed by Cultivators (22.67%), Other occupation (19.33 %), Services (10%), Household Industrial workers (6.67%) and 3.33 % were self employed.

Table -7 Level of Awareness

SL.No.	Prior to joining the SHGS					After Joining the SHGs			
	Indicators	Aware	%	Not Aware	%	Aware	%	Not Aware	%
1	National Issues	50	33.33%	100	66.67%	98	65.33%	52	34.67%
2	Local Issues	56	37.33%	94	62.67%	135	90%	15	10%
3	Other issues	62	41.33%	88	58.67%	125	83.33%	25	16.67%

Source: Field Survey

Table-7 shows the respondents' level of awareness both before and after joining Self-Help Groups (SHGs). Prior to participating in Self-Help Groups (SHGs) 33.33% were aware about National Issues and 66.67% were not aware. 37.33% was attentive of Local Issues and 62.67% were not aware. In terms of other issues 41.33% were aware and 58.67% were not conscious before joining Self-Help Groups (SHGs).

After joining Self-Help Groups (SHGs), the responders' level of awareness increased. 65.33% were aware of national issues and 34.67% were not aware. There was an overwhelming increase in awareness in local issues as 90% were conscious and only 10% were not aware of local issues. Regarding other issues, 83.33 % were aware about it and the remaining 16.67% were not conscious of other issues.

Table -8 Level of Awareness regarding different welfare measures

SL. No.	Before joining the SHGS					After Joining the SHGS			
	Welfare Measures	YES	%	NO	%	YES	%	NO	%
1	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act	35	23.33	115	76.67	150	100	0	0
2	Indira Awaas Yojana	36	24	114	76	138	92	12	8
3	Mid-Day Meal	60	40	90	60	143	95.33	7	4.67
4	<i>Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan</i>	53	35.33	97	64.67	145	96.67	5	33.33
5	<i>Others</i>	45	30	105	70	90	60	60	40

Source: Field Survey

From table-8, it is evident that before joining Self-Help Groups (SHGs), only 23.33% had knowledge about M.G.N. E.G.A, 24% knew about Indira Awaas Yojana, 40% had knew about Mid-Day Meal, 35.33% had knowledge about Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, and only 30% had knowledge about different other welfare measures.

But after being the member of the Self-Help Groups (SHGs) 100% had knowledge about M.G.N. E.G.A, 92% had knowledge about Indira Awaas Yojana, 95.33% knew about Mid-Day Meal, 96.67% had knowledge about Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and 60% were aware about different other welfare measures.

Table -9 Family Decision-Making

SL	Participation Level
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NO	Before joining the SHGS			After Joining the SHGs		
	Time	Number of Women	%	Time	Number of Women	%
1	Always	55	36.66%	Always	135	90%
2	Occasional	95	63.33%	Occasional	15	10%

Source: Field Survey

Table-9 shows how the decision making in the family has changed dramatically from before and after joining the Self-Help Groups (SHGs) by the respondents. Before joining Self-Help Groups (SHGs), only 36.66% of the respondents used to regularly participate in family decision-making and 63.33% only had occasional participate in family decision-making.

However, after becoming members of Self-Help Groups (SHGs), there was more involvement in family decision participation with 90% always taking part in the decision in the family and only 10% of the respondent occasionally used to take part in the decision of the family.

Table-10 Status in Political Participation

SL NO	Level of Participation				
	Before joining the SHGS			After Joining the SHGs	
	Time	Number of Women	%	Number of Women	%
1	Never	78	52%	15	10%
2	Sometimes	62	41.33%	90	60%
3	Often	10	6.66%	45	30%
4	Total	150	100%	150	100%

Source: Field Survey

Table-10 shows the respondents' level of participation both before and after they joined Self-Help Groups (SHGs). Prior to participating in Self-Help Groups (SHGs) 52% of the respondents had no political participation, 41.33% sometimes took part in political activities and only 6.66% often had political participation. After becoming member of SHGs only 10% of the respondents did not participate in politics, 60% of the respondents occasionally participated in politics, and 30% of the respondents frequently participated in politics.

Major Findings

1. Most of the female members have joined in the Self-Help Groups (SHGs) for starting businesses to be economically improved.
2. The majority of female participants in Self-Help Groups (SHGs) were between the age of 21 to 50 years and most of them were Hindu followed by Muslim in religion.
3. Majority of them are illiterate and agricultural labourer.
4. After joining SHGs, their level of awareness in National, local or other issues have increased.
5. They have become much more aware about the welfare schemes of the Governments after joining the SHGs.
6. The decision-making thoughts have increased after joining the SHGs.
7. They have earned more after joining the SHGs.
8. They are taking part on political activity significantly after joining the SHGs.

Conclusion

Although SHGs are primarily situated in rural regions, urban poor people and women are not able to access them. Due to some kind of social bias in this area, women are unable to join SHGs because men predominate in the district's metropolitan areas when it comes to labour involvement. Thus, SHGs' success in eliminating poverty is primarily limited to rural areas. To expand this novel approach to urban areas, men must be persuaded to conduct door-to-door counselling and agree to lift the veil of authority over issues such as gender inequality and social injustices. Only then will poverty be eradicated in both rural and urban settings and affect women who were deprived of their rights.

The majority of SHGs are located in rural areas, hence urban poor and women are not able to access or join them. The dominance of males in the economic workforce in urban areas of the Cooch Behar district and also due to some form of societal bias prevents women from joining Self-Help Groups (SHGs). Thus, the success of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in eliminating poverty is primarily limited to rural areas. To spread this novel policy in urban settings, it is necessary to conduct door-to-door counselling by convincing men in the community to comprehend reality and agree to remove their authority to address issues such as gender inequality and social inequalities. Only then will poverty be eradicated in both rural and urban areas, and marginalized women will be empowered on both a social-economic level.

The last step is to create a system procedure to ensure consistency in the SHG formation process after identifying BPL (Below Poverty Level) individuals. In order for Rural Banks to help the poor by offering microfinance to improve their socioeconomic status and help them become mainstream in society with transparency, the Ministry of Finance must grant them authority after receiving government approval at each block separately.

Financial assistance to women through Self-Help Groups (SHGs) certainly has positive impact socially, economically and politically among the member of the Self-Help Groups (SHGs). However, issues like training, capacity building, awareness and practicality of the group activity need to be properly addressed by making long policies so as to strengthen women empowerment through microfinance.

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