

Assessing the Role of Self- Help Groups in Socio-Economic Empowerment of Rural Women: A Case Study of East Siang District Of Arunachal Pradesh

Ms Mary Perme^{1*}, Ms Aina Tayeng², Dr Romeo Dupak³, Mr Marshal Gao⁴,

^{1*}Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Jawaharlal Nehru College, Pasighat, Arunachal Pradesh

²Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Jawaharlal Nehru College, Pasighat, Arunachal Pradesh

³Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Jawaharlal Nehru College, Pasighat, Arunachal Pradesh, romeodupak@gmail.com

⁴Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Jawaharlal Nehru College, Pasighat, Arunachal Pradesh, marshalg133@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the vital role of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in advancing women's empowerment in the East Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh. SHGs have emerged as an effective grassroots mechanism for poverty alleviation, enabling rural women particularly those from economically disadvantaged households to engage more actively in the mainstream of economic development. Since human resources significantly influence a nation's progress, and women constitute nearly half of India's population, their empowerment becomes directly linked to national growth. The findings of this study reveal that participation in SHGs has led to substantial improvements in women's financial stability and livelihood opportunities, accompanied by a remarkable shift in their social standing, confidence, and decision-making ability. Although Indian women have achieved notable progress since Independence, they continue to confront persistent socio-cultural obstacles rooted in the patriarchal fabric of society. Problems such as domestic violence, dowry practices, child marriage, and female infanticide still hinder women's personal and social advancement. Despite their demographic strength, women often remain marginalized in social, economic, and political spaces. This study, therefore, underscores the transformative potential of SHGs in challenging deep-rooted inequalities and fostering inclusive development in East Siang District.

Keywords: Self-Help Groups, Women Empowerment, Political Participation

INTRODUCTION

Self Help Groups have emerged as an important institutional mechanism for addressing poverty and social exclusion among rural women by enabling them to participate in economic activities and collective decision-making. In a state where geographical isolation and limited employment opportunities restrict women's access to income, SHGs provide an alternative pathway for economic participation and social recognition.

Economic development is closely linked to the effective use of human resources, and women constitute nearly half of India's population. However, their contribution has often remained undervalued due to structural inequalities and social constraints. In this context, SHGs play a crucial role by encouraging savings, facilitating access to credit, and supporting small-scale livelihood activities. The findings of the study indicate that women who joined SHGs experienced noticeable improvements in their economic condition through increased income, access to loans, and financial independence. Equally important are the changes observed in their social position, including

enhanced self-confidence, greater participation in household and community decisions, and improved social mobility.

Despite constitutional safeguards and development programmes, women in India continue to face challenges arising from patriarchal norms and social practices such as dowry, early marriage, domestic violence, and gender discrimination. These factors contribute to the continued marginalization of women, particularly in rural areas. As noted by **A.S. Altekar (1956)**, the extent of freedom granted to women reflects the nature of a society's progress and governance. Similarly, **Swami Vivekananda (1996)** emphasized that societal development is impossible without improving the status of women, likening it to a bird attempting to fly with only one wing.

In this broader social context, SHGs in East Siang District have functioned not merely as economic units but as platforms for collective empowerment, contributing to both individual advancement and community development.

ORIGIN

The concept of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) has its roots in the microfinance movement that emerged in Bangladesh during the 1970s. The idea is widely associated with the Grameen Bank which was founded by Professor Muhammad Yunus, a renowned Bangladeshi economist. His pioneering work was based on the belief that poverty persists not due to lack of ability among the poor but due to the absence of access to institutional credit. Professor Yunus argued that with minimal financial assistance, proper guidance and trust, poor individuals, particularly women could engage in productive activities, generate income and reliably repay small loans. This philosophy laid the foundation for collective lending models, and by the mid-1970s onwards, group-based microcredit initiatives started to take shape.

In India, the evolution of SHGs followed a gradual and context-specific path. Early forms of women's collective organisation existed even before the formal microfinance framework was introduced. One such example can be traced back to 1954, when the Textile Labour Association (TLA) in Ahmedabad established a women's wing to provide skill training in activities such as sewing and knitting to women from mill workers' families. These early initiatives focused on income supplementation and skill development rather than formal financial inclusion.

However, the significant milestone in the Indian context was led by Ela Bhatt with the establishment of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in 1972. SEWA organised women working in the informal sector—such as street vendors, artisans, weavers, and home-based workers—with the aim of improving their economic security and collective bargaining power. Although SEWA was not a SHG in the strict sense, it played a crucial role in shaping the philosophy of women-centred, group-based economic organisation in India.

Institutional support for SHGs gained momentum in the mid-1980s when the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) began experimenting with informal savings and credit groups during 1986–87. However, the real breakthrough came in the early 1990s. In 1992, NABARD launched the Self-Help Group–Bank Linkage Programme, which marked a turning point in rural finance. Under this initiative, SHGs were linked directly with formal banking institutions, enabling members to access credit without collateral. From 1993 onwards, the Reserve Bank of India permitted banks to open savings accounts for SHGs, further strengthening their financial integration.

Parallel to these developments, the Government of India introduced the Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY) in 1999, aiming to promote self-employment among rural poor through group formation, skill development, and access to credit. Over time, limitations in implementation led to policy restructuring, resulting in the launch of the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) in 2011. NRLM adopted a more comprehensive and inclusive approach, placing SHGs at

the centre of rural livelihood promotion, women's empowerment, and financial inclusion. Thus, the SHG movement in India represents an evolutionary process shaped by global microfinance ideas, grassroots women's organisations, and sustained institutional and policy support.

LITERATURE REVIEW

R.K Sahoo and S.N Tripathy (ed.) (2006) Self-Help Group and Women Empowerment contains important research articles contributed by different researches relating to problems of Self Help Groups and women empowerment. These papers study the effectiveness of women Self Help Group in ameliorating their socio-economic backwardness. **Dushyant Kumar (2010)** in his book Issues of Women empowerment in India discusses that empowerment is the process and the result of the process whereby the powerless or less powerful numbers of the society gain greater access and control over material and knowledge resources, challenges the ideologies of discrimination and subordination. He says that there is an urgent need to recognise and utilize the role played by women. The real solution according to him lies in a holistic approach that deals with the entire major interrelated issues of social, economic, educational, and political and legal equality. The agenda of women empowerment would simply not get accomplished through legal provision but through provision with better education and equal employment opportunity to enhance their status at all levels.

In the article "Micro finance and Empowerment of rural women through Self Help Group: A case study in Papum Pare District of Arunachal Pradesh" by **Ram Krishna Mandal and Likha Kiran (2010)** tries to investigate the role of SHGs in promoting income generating activities and poverty alleviation in order to achieve socio-economic empowerment of the women and also to search the problems preventing the SHGs to sustain in the society. Women Empowerment Through Self Help Groups by **B.K.Singh (2006)** investigates the problems of building sustainable self help group putting special emphasis on training programmes and methods for the members of SHGs.

N. Tejmani Singh and Th. Jitendra Singh (2009) in "Microfinance and Self Help Group: A Boon for socio-economic development, A Case Study of Manipur," examines the important role of micro finance and Self Help Groups for the socio-economic development of poor women in Manipur state particularly. The result of the study reveals that after joining SHGs poor women can improve their economic condition and living standard because they can generate income independently. **Swami Prakash Srivastava and Ms. Bhawna Saini (2014)** in their book titled Economic Empowerment of Indian Women in 21st Century had also made attempt to analyze the broad concept of Economic Empowerment of Indian Women. Despite several laws and regulations being passed to uplift the status of women in general, women are still regarded as second class citizens and are discriminated on various grounds. According to them women should be educated. This will broaden their outlook and make them aware about their rights, responsibilities and duties in society. Also women should be encouraged to be economically independent. They observed that there should be a general awareness of women's problems and the growth of women's organization should be encouraged.

K. Devendra (1990) in his book Status and Position of Women in India with special reference to women in contemporary India discusses the position of women in India under various circumstances. The author also deals with the economic participation, political awareness, social position etc. In "Micro Financing and poverty alleviation through Self Help Groups in India: Issues and Challenges" by **Mohd. Shamim and Mohd. Mohsin Khan (2012)** explains how Micro finance can be an effective tool for poverty alleviation programs. Considering the number of problems faced by SHG to develop the system of micro financing. To accelerate the penetration of micro financing in rural areas to alleviate poverty stern actions should be taken by the government which must be taken due care to get the maximum benefits of Micro financing.

Rural Credit and SHGs- Micro Finance needs and Concepts in India by **K.G. Karmakar (1999)** examines the state of the rural credit system and studies the Micro-finance needs of the rural poor. He observes that it offers the solution of SHGs to enable the rural poor to attain economic empowerment and a right to live with dignity. He states that SHGs offer the easiest and most economical method of enabling the rural poor to contribute to growth of rural economy.

The role of the elite women in Indian politics has been discussed by **Vijoy Agnew (1979)** in his book *Elite Women in Indian Politics*. It appreciates the role of Indian women's organizations in changing the outlook of the society towards womenfolk.

SELF HELP GROUPS

SHGs have been rapidly growing and have taken over the country. SHG's has helped improve women's social and economic position. The main idea behind SHG is how groups work together. Self Help Groups are small groups of rural poor people who are all from the same economic background and come together on their own to save modest amounts of money regularly. These savings are put into a common fund that the group decides how to use to satisfy members' emergency needs and give out loans without collateral. They are a small group of women and men from rural areas who are not doing well financially or socially. Their goal is to help them develop their skills, talents, and abilities, which will make them more powerful. They have been acknowledged as effective instruments for assisting the impoverished and as an alternate means to address the immediate credit requirements of the underprivileged through frugality. SHG is a way for women to learn how to save money. SHG helps women have the same rights as everyone else in the democratic, economic, social, and cultural arenas as participants, decision makers, and beneficiaries. Women in SHG join together to obtain help with their finances and get help with their businesses. The SHG structure is a way to strengthen a nation. Women may help women feel better about themselves, get better jobs, and do better in their families, among other things.

NABARD says that "Self-Help Group" is a small, economically similar, and close-knit group of poor people living in rural areas that come together on their own to save money and agree to put it into a common fund that would be lent to its members as needed for their socio-economic development. Self-help organisations have made it possible for women to be in charge of their own growth. Women who join Self Help groups learn more about the different welfare programs that the government and NGOs have started. At the moment, there are a lot of SHGs in communities. Here are some of the reasons why Self Help Groups are important:

- to help rural women feel more confident about being able to take care of themselves
- to stop being taken advantage of
- to get more people involved in society through interaction and women's freedom of movement
- to teach rural women about money
- to help women work together toward a shared goal and deal with the different kinds of exploitation they experience
- Make the things that women have in common bigger so that both movements can work better to get justice, equality, and freedom for all people.
- Give women more chances to learn and be aware
- Help group members get in touch with the financial credit institutions
Get women to use their hidden financial potential and make development programs self-sufficient and independent.
- Support decentralised problem analysis and group action, such as regular group savings and credit.
Give women a full say in socio-economic and development planning at the local level.

- It gives people more influence over their minds by making them feel more independent, confident, and self-sufficient.

Women in rural India are starting to understand not only their world, but also the power they have as a group to alter their lives. The efforts they have made may not seem like much and may seem scattered, yet they have made a big difference in the lives of people and in small groups.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment of women can be done in many ways. It can be done through by providing economic opportunity, social equality, personal liberties and basic human rights. Women empowerment involves freeing women from the vicious grips of social, economic, political, caste and gender-based discrimination. It means giving women the freedom to make life choices.

Women empowerment does not mean ‘defying women’ rather it means strengthening her to participate in all activities with parity to men. Women empowerment in simple words implies women’s power of self-organisation and self-reliance. Some define empowerment as a process of awareness and conscientization of capacity building leading to greater participation, effective decision-making power and control leading to transformative action. Women bring in the potential of women to improve self-assurance, enhanced position, and function in family and so on. Women empowerment is the need of today’s world. There has been a steady increase in women empowerment. Empowering women is the fundamental right of women. They have equal rights to participate in all spheres of activity. Improvement of society depends on how women are empowered. Women normally have to work harder than men. Despite the important role women play for family and society, in all essential areas of life, women are generally at a disadvantage as compared to men, in terms of education, income, partner choice, inheritance laws, property rights, decision-making processes, community organization, and leadership positions in the field of education, business, or politics.

Women cannot just be classified as “Breeder-Feeder-Producer.” They are so much just more than that. Women are to be considered to be equivalent accomplices with men in progress. Freedom of women is essential to the financial advancement of the country, as well as for the upliftment of community. In recent years, women's empowerment has been a major factor determining their status. Although the process of empowerment varies from culture to culture but one thing that remains the same is increased participation in decision making, more equitable status of women in the family and community, increased political rights and increased self-esteem among all women across different cultures. The prevailing status of women in a society serves as an index of its civilisation and also influences to a great extent the country’s economic and social growth.

SELF HELP GROUP IN ARUNACHAL PRADESH

While Self-Help Groups (SHGs) were formally introduced in Arunachal Pradesh around 2012, their institutional visibility and functional reach remained limited in the early years. During this phase, SHG activity was confined to seven blocks, with only 235 groups functioning under the Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana alongside the State Rural Livelihood Mission. A decisive transformation took place in 2016 when the Arunachal State Rural Livelihoods Mission (ArSRLM) took over full implementation responsibility. The programme was subsequently scaled up to include fifteen blocks, combining seven existing blocks with eight newly designated resource blocks. This restructuring strengthened administrative coordination and expanded support mechanisms, laying the foundation for more systematic SHG promotion and women-centred livelihood interventions across the state. In Arunachal Pradesh, Self Help Groups (SHGs) formed in rural and marginalised cluster have proven to be a powerful means towards addressing the issues such as lack of polished skills, illiteracy and poverty; through collective efforts. It is primarily managed by the Arunachal

State Rural Livelihoods Mission (ArSRLM) and the State Urban Livelihoods Mission (ArSULM). As of January 2025, there are over 11,730 SHGs in the state, involving approximately 91,964 households. Majority of the activities typically taken up by the women are pickle making, piggery, poultry, mushroom cultivation, handloom, traditional spice gardening etc. Some of the notable SHGs and their activities found out during Research in East Siang highlight several active groups across different villages:

- EngoKojе SHG (Pasighat): The Governor of Arunachal Pradesh recently honoured them for their outstanding work in making economic changes at the grassroots level.
- SHG KojеRaseng (Sigar): This group works on farming, related activities, including processing farm products at home.
- Kado Party SHG (Namsing): This group was skilled at weaving, creating traditional clothes, and processing farm items.
- Nyanyi Mete & Ute Poro SHGs (Ngorlung): They grow rubber and process food.
- KigongLunggong SHG (Takilalung): Works in farming.
- Milik Kalik SHG (Ayeng): Known for growing vegetables and making traditional foods.
- KarpungRaseng Group (Yapgo): This group focuses on making handicrafts and traditional clothing.

SHGs help people in rural areas of the state become more self-sufficient and empowered, and they have also helped Arunachal grow in many ways through different programs. The government of Arunachal Pradesh has been dedicated to helping the state's SHGs. Here are some of the most recent success stories and news about SHGs in Arunachal Pradesh:

- July 2020 Awards: The Arunachal State Rural Livelihood Mission (ArSRLM), Block Mission Management Unit (BMMU), and Arunachal Pradesh Rural Bank (APRB), Roing, gave awards to fifteen SHGs. They all got a citation and Rs. 1 lakh in cash for encouraging people to work in the Lower Dibang Valley district.
- Loan Disbursements in July 2021: The Chief Minister gave out Rs 8.27 crore in loans to 789 SHGs across the state through the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana National Rural Livelihoods Mission.
- Financial Inclusion: This program's goal is to include rural communities in the economy by giving them access to effective and inexpensive financial services. This will boost GDP and lower income disparity.
- Training Programs: There are a lot of training programs held regularly around the state to get SHGs ready for different ways to make money.
- December 2022 Transport Initiative: Eleven automobiles bought under the Arunachal Grameen Express Yojna were given to 11 different SHGs in the East Siang District. These vehicles helped them in their business activities.

CHALLENGES

1. Cultural and Societal Barriers: One of the major problems faced by women is that even if they want to take charge, they often face societal resistance or gender-based violence that discourages them from stepping into the "mainstream." It's not just about forming a group, it's about overcoming the traditional norms that limit where a woman can go and what she can do (**Baruah, 2004; Das & Barman, 2020**)
2. Institutional and Bureaucratic Hurdles: According to studies it has been observed that bureaucratic red tape makes it incredibly difficult for SHGs to access credit. Even when government support exists on paper, the "hurdle" of actually getting that money from banks or navigating political interference often stops progress before it even starts.

3. **The Threat of Climate Change:** This is a newer but critical challenge which is ecological degradation and climate change. They are directly affecting the livelihood options available to SHGs. If the land or the environment is failing, the traditional farming or resource-based businesses these women run are at constant risk.
4. **Training Deficits and marketing:** Finally, the lack of market access and proper infrastructure remains a constant problem. Without good roads or reliable training and capacity building, even the most successful groups struggle to grow beyond their local village level.

SUGGESTIONS

To maximize the impact of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) on women's empowerment and local governance, we must move beyond traditional models and adopt a more modern, inclusive approach.

To begin, we need to focus on Holistic Training and Entrepreneurship. In districts like Upper Siang, research clearly shows that the more training women receive, the more their economic power grows. We should expand these programs to include "SHG 2.0" skills moving past basic handicrafts to teach e-commerce, digital marketing, and professional branding so women can compete in a global market.

Second, addressing Infrastructure and Market Access is critical, as poor connectivity remains a major barrier in our state. Initiatives like "ARUNima" are already making a difference by placing traditional handlooms and local tea onto national platforms like Amazon. We must continue to bridge this gap to ensure our products reach customers far beyond our borders.

Third, we must advocate for Inclusive Governance. While it is encouraging that women's voter turnout is high at approximately 52%, it is concerning that women still hold only about 5% of seats in the state assembly. By strengthening SHG federations, we can create a "leadership nursery" that prepares women to take on active roles in Panchayati Raj institutions and higher political offices.

Lastly, we need to make Targeted Inclusion a top priority. A truly successful movement leaves no one behind. We need to actively promote SHG membership for the most vulnerable in our society including widows, the differently-abled as well as the LGBTQ+ community. This ensures that the "silent revolution" of empowerment reaches every single household in Arunachal Pradesh.

CONCLUSION

While Self-Help Groups (SHGs) were formally introduced in Arunachal Pradesh around 2012, their presence during the initial years remained modest and uneven across districts. In the early phase, SHG activities were limited in both scale and institutional support, with implementation confined to only seven blocks. At this stage, merely 235 SHGs were functioning, primarily under the Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana in coordination with the State Rural Livelihood Mission. The programme during this period lacked a dedicated institutional framework, which restricted its outreach, monitoring capacity, and long-term sustainability.

A significant policy and administrative shift occurred in 2016, marking a turning point in the SHG movement in the state. With the Arunachal State Rural Livelihoods Mission (ArSRLM) assuming full responsibility for implementation, SHGs were brought under a more structured and mission-oriented framework. This transition was accompanied by a strategic expansion of the programme's geographical coverage, increasing the number of operational blocks to fifteen. The inclusion of eight newly designated resource blocks alongside the seven existing ones reflected a conscious effort to strengthen grassroots institutions and extend support to previously underserved areas.

This restructuring improved coordination between implementing agencies, enhanced access to capacity-building and financial services, and enabled more consistent monitoring of SHG activities. As a result, SHGs gradually evolved from limited welfare-oriented groups into more organized

platforms for women's participation in livelihood generation and community development. The post-2016 phase thus laid a stronger foundation for systematic SHG promotion and women empowerment through women-centred livelihood interventions across Arunachal Pradesh.

REFERENCES

1. **Agnew, V. (1979).** Elite women in Indian politics, Vikas Publishing House: New Delhi.
2. **Altekar, A. S. (1956).** The position of women in Hindu civilization, Motilal Banarsidass.
3. **ArSRLM (2024).** Annual progress report on Self-Help Groups in Arunachal Pradesh, Arunachal State Rural Livelihoods Mission, Government of Arunachal Pradesh.
4. **Baruah, S. (2004).** Durable disorder: Understanding the politics of Northeast India, Oxford University Press.
5. **Das, N. & Barman, J. (2020).** "Women, livelihood, and collective action in rural Northeast India," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 27(2): 245–262.
6. **Devendra, K. (1990),** Status and position of women in India with special reference to contemporary society, Inter-India Publications.
7. **ECI (2011).** Primary census abstract, Census of India 2011, Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India.
8. **GoAP (2025).** Economic survey of Arunachal Pradesh 2024–25, Department of Economics & Statistics, Government of Arunachal Pradesh
9. **Karmakar, K. G. (1999).** Rural credit and Self-Help Groups: Microfinance needs and concepts in India, Sage Publications.
10. **Kumar, D. (2010).** Issues of women empowerment in India. Rajat Publications.
11. **Mandal, R. K. & Kiran, L. (2010).** "Microfinance and the empowerment of rural women through Self-Help Groups: A case study of Papum Pare district, Arunachal Pradesh," *Journal of Rural Development*, 29(4), 451–466.
12. **NABARD (2023).** Status of microfinance in India, National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development.
13. **National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5). (2021).** India fact sheet. Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India.
14. **RBI (2022).** Financial inclusion and SHG–bank linkage programme, Reserve Bank of India Publications.
15. **Sahoo, R. K. & Tripathy, S. N. (Eds.) (2006).** Self-Help Groups and women empowerment, Anmol Publications.
16. **Shamim, M., & Khan, M. M. (2012).** "Microfinance and poverty alleviation through Self-Help Groups in India," *International Journal of Social Economics*, 39(6):420–432.
17. **Singh, B. K. (2006).** Women empowerment through Self-Help Groups, Commonwealth Publishers.
18. **Singh, N. T. & Singh, T. J. (2009).** "Microfinance and Self-Help Groups as instruments of socio-economic development: A case study of Manipur," *Indian Journal of Social Development*, 9(1): 87–101.
19. **Srivastava, S. P. & Saini, B. (2014).** Economic empowerment of Indian women in the 21st century, Serials Publications.
20. **Swami Vivekananda (1996).** The complete works of Swami Vivekananda (Vol. 5), Advaita Ashrama.