Dalit Women Empowerment through Self Help Groups: A Critical Analysis

Tehzeeb Alam

PhD candidate, Aligarh Muslim University, UP.

Introduction

As a part of developing country we have a very clear picture of poverty and unemployment in our country. Dalit women are the most disadvantaged in the world and living in very fragile conditions. When the world is talking about women empowerment and equality, Dalit women are fighting for their existence and identity. Some organization or NGOs are working for the betterment of this group. Initiation of Self Help Groups in the rural areas giving opportunities to earn livelihood through microfinance for support activities like agriculture, cattle grazing, dairy, bee farming etc SHGs intend to enhance the equal status of women as participants by empowering them. SHGs are good formal institutions to generate income for needy person among their own community members by involving them in planning, decision making and management of sustainable natural resources. The women from the lower caste generally work long hours to feed their families and especially large number of dalit women earn their livelihood in informal sector. SHGs intend to help women get independent source of income outside of home which reduce dependency on husband’s income by increasing assertiveness of women and provide the exposure to new ideas, independent thinking and social support. Once womenfolk attain economic independence and are empowered they might question and protest against male dominance. Women SHGs have been playing a major role in both economic and social empowerment of women but there are also problems faced by the women in SHGs - Rigidity of the structure is a major drawback and, illiteracy, ignorance and lack of raw material reduce the productivity, patriarchal society obstructs the free participation of women in the groups. Illiteracy and unawareness of the group members with procedural formalities leads corruption in many cases. This paper intends to critically analyse the role of SHGs in enhancing dalit women’s capacity to gain entrepreneurial skills and independence from exploitative occupations.

SHG and Income Generation Activities A major concern for the formation of a SHG is for economic reasons. Once the savings is regular and adequate capital has built up, the members can start individual micro-enterprises or income generating-activities by taking loans from their respective groups. It is up to the group to prioritize the needs of its members. In the beginning, the members will take loans for consumption and medical purposes but later they will go for the income-generating loans. Income generation is promoted both through training programs in capacity building and the provision of micro-capital to SHGs for investing in small enterprises. The successful activities include food-processing units based on locally available resources, dairy
products, goat and chicken forming and cultivation of non-seasonal vegetables (Radhakrishna, 2005). Among the very poor, the women tend to be major income earners. The incomes that are generated by women are fully spent on the family, especially for the education and the health care of the children. On several occasions, it is observed that the earning of the woman becomes the only stable and regular income of the family. Economic dependence is the most prominent deprivation of the women. Hence, the income-earning capabilities are increasingly viewed as an effective means for the empowerment of women. The economic empowerment, resulting from the micro-enterprises, has improved their confidence living conditions and above all enabled them to participate in the growth and development of the community at the grass-root level (Jaya, 2000).

Income-generation activities help in the arousing self-confidence among women.

- Women get recognition as an economic entity: the family and the group recognize women as individuals. Women get an opportunity to learn how to relate one another.

- Women get to know about the outside world; they get the benefit to greater exposure and the awareness level increase.

- Women get greater self-confidence and capacity for marketing their products.

Women get a platform to express them-selves and gain social acceptance.

References:


