

Time to Cross the Barriers of Patriarchy: A Scheme for Women Self Help Groups in Odisha

OPEN ACCESS

Manuscript ID:
ASH-2020-08023386

Volume: 8

Issue: 2

Month: October

Year: 2020

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

Received: 28.06.2020

Accepted: 17.09.2020

Published: 01.10.2020

Citation:

Singh, Saubhagalaxmi.
“Time to Cross the Barriers
of Patriarchy: A Scheme
for Women Self Help
Groups in Odisha.” *Shanlax
International Journal
of Arts, Science and
Humanities*, vol. 8, no. 2,
2020, pp. 102–106.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v8i2.3386>



This work is licensed
under a Creative Commons
Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0
International License

Saubhagalaxmi Singh

Senior Research Fellow, Pondicherry University, Puducherry, India

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0459-1488>

Abstract

The newly launched Scheme by the Govt. of Odisha for convergence of ‘Mission Shakti’ with ten Govt. Departments for provisioning of services and procurement of goods has transformative potential to challenge the patriarchy by broadening the working spheres of Women Self Help Groups (WSHGs) from four walls of the domestic sphere to a public platform. However, this Scheme suffers from the shortcomings of an imbalance between the aims and lack of inclusivity of WSHGs, which need to be removed by taking proper measures before the Scheme is fully implemented.

Keywords: Scheme, COVID-19, WSHGs, Mission Shakti, Empowerment, Patriarchy, Domestic and Public

The novel Coronavirus or COVID-19 has made many of us stay indoors without even stepping a foot outside except for the essential services. That does not make us quitters fighters. Rather as this is the only way to break out the chain of COVID-19, especially in a country like India, which is widely spread but with limited resources. But the frontrunner fighters who are working round the clock by putting their lives at risk are the Doctors, Nurses, Health-Workers, Police Men, Sweepers, Journalists, etc. and every such person deserves a big round of applause and appreciation undoubtedly. However, another group on the fields who are at the run of risking and exposing themselves to the highly contagious virus, much like other foot soldiers, are Women Self Help Groups (WSHGs). In Odisha, these Women Self Help Groups came forward selflessly to perform their duties in this crucial juncture, starting from making and distributing masks at a reasonable price (sometimes free of cost), especially when there is an acute shortage of masks to delivering ration and other necessary items at people’s doorstep with the coronavirus awareness mostly in the shutdown areas, providing cooked food to the needy and to those who are in Govt. Quarantine Centers and motivating people to wash hands sanitize homes and surrounding areas regularly. Moving one step ahead, few of them have restricted the unnecessary movement of the villagers by guarding on a shift basis and also have not allowed any outsiders to enter their villages by making barricades at the entrance of the villages. Most importantly, until now, they have donated around twelve lakh rupees altogether to the CM’s Relief Fund without being seen much in the picture. Ironically, these WSHGs have always been second in the development schemes despite their great potential to contribute to the development of society with their empowering spirit. However, latterly, the Govt. of Odisha seemed to be gradually acknowledging the true potential of WSHGs more in winning the game of politics rather than their contribution towards the development of society.

There are 70 lakh women in 6 lakh self-help groups, and this could be the reason why just before and after both of the general and assembly elections of 2019, the Govt. of Odisha launched some new schemes for WSHGs to which many of them seem to be following the same conservative and charitable attitude of keep abreast the women folks within the same domestic periphery. Besides, there is one amongst the new schemes which intends to expand the peripheral activities of SHGs beyond the ambit of four walls, which is the convergence of “Mission Shakti” with ten Government Departments for the provisioning of services and procurement of goods.

Methodology

The Present Study is descriptive cum exploratory in nature. Qualitative Method has been chosen as tools of data collection and analysis of data. The secondary data are collected from News papers and electronic media. The researcher used key informant interviews by taking ten respondents from 10 SHGs in Soso Gram Panchayat of Keonjhar district.

Why is this Scheme most Appealing as Well as Alluring?

In Odisha, the Mission Shakti Programme was launched on 8th March 2001 to empower poor women by mobilizing them into small groups through the development of saving habits. It was initiated by keeping in mind that this saving habit will provide access to credit by linking it with formal financial institutions, which will create livelihood earning opportunities for these women. The Programme, which was launched as a project two decades back, has turned into a silent movement since around 70 lakh women organized into 6 lakh Self Help Groups with 5000 crores savings and 2000 crores of annual exposure (Business Standard 2019). The study shows that even after 20 years, the same charitable attitude of distributing seed money prevails. Most of the women are only involved in saving and borrowing money from the bank and being used only for home expenditure or sometimes as money lending locally with some interests. Unfortunately, we do not have official data for the same.

Nevertheless, there are very few groups who have gone beyond this money lending by engaging

themselves in the livelihood earning activities but again confined to make spices, pickle, papad, chat powder, etc. within the domain of ‘women’s work’ which they have been doing for their families as a mother, wife, sister, daughter from time immemorial. It would not be an exaggeration to say that this is not just the situation of Keonjhar district but the situation of the whole Odisha. No one can deny that few Women Self Help Groups are now able to stand on their own feet by creating businesses of lakhs of rupees, but these few numbers do not represent 70 lakh women of 6 lakh SHGs. However, very recently, Naveen Patnaik, the Honorable CM, after coming to power consistently for 5th time, declared a rejuvenating scheme to converge the Mission Shakti Programme with ten different Govt. Departments aim to do a business of Rs 1000 crores by giving forty types of works to WSHGs, and this got approval by the cabinet in the first meeting itself on 29th May 2019. The list of services are as follows:

1. Women & Child Development and Mission Shakti Department for supplying of Pre-School Uniforms in Anganwadi Centers,
2. Food Supplies and Consumer Welfare Department for Paddy procurement Operations, appointment of WSHGs as fair price shop dealers under the Public Distribution System (PDS),
3. Agriculture and Farmer’s Empowerment Department for engagement of WSHGs as seed dealers of State Seeds Corporation Limited (OSSC), small nursery management, bee cultivation, preserving Unit cultivation under Horticulture Scheme, supply of ragi ladoos in order to promote Millet Mission by WSHGs as commercial Agri-enterprises under Mukhyamantri Krushi Udyoga Yojana (MKUY),
4. School and Mass Education Department for preparation and Supply of Mid-Day meals,
5. Department of Energy for involving SHGs in electric meter reading in panchayats across the state,
6. Department of Forest and Environment for conservation of the existing Forest, restoration of degraded forest, Sustainable Forest Management, processing and value addition to the available Non-timber Forest Products (NTFPs),

7. Department of Housing and Urban Development for running common service centers in urban and local bodies,
8. Fisheries and Animal Resources Department for Pisciculture in Gram Panchayat tank, Semi-commercial layer farming in deep Litter System
9. Health and Family Welfare Department for supplying of Hospital Diets, Sanitary Napkins and Mosquito Nets and
10. Department of Rural Development for routine maintenance of 10000 km of rural roads. All among the above activities, certain activities such as MDM in Schools, electricity meter reading, paddy procurement, Pisciculture are already in operation on a trial basis before the announcement of the scheme itself.

It needs no reiteration that the existing SHG model has the potential to change the lives of women in a positive direction as to some extent, it has helped few SHGs to earn a decent income by engaging themselves in petty business, which has pragmatically pointed to its effect on the lives of the rural poor, but that did not help them to get social recognition, neither in their family nor in their society as a woman named Manju (name changed) narrates “Now that I don’t have to ask for money from my husband every time, as I am earning something, but that did not enhance my social status neither in my own family nor in my society since there is no difference between what I was doing before and what I am doing now.” A careful analysis of the new scheme makes one realize that it has the transformative potential to challenge the patriarchy by broadening the working spheres of WSHGs from four walls of the domestic sphere to a public platform that even today continues to be the domain of men. Moreover, this scheme will add a new dimension to the relation between women and empowerment by boosting up the confidence of women with the creation of new identity as this scheme will make possible frequent visit to different Govt. offices and meetings with different Govt. officials, which were beyond the imagination for homemakers mostly in a state like Odisha. As a further matter, the present scheme can change the perception and attitude of people towards women and their work because this scheme not only ensures economic but also social status, which may

create a space for them in the political ground as we witnessed, an elected MP, 68-year-old, Pramila Bisoi from Aska Lok Sabha Constituency (Odisha) who was not just a member of SHG group but an activist who was awarded ‘Prakruti Bandhu’ for forest protection and regeneration which helped her in drawing the attention of BJD party during 2019 election. Adding to more to this Scheme, Commissioner-cum-Director, Mission Shakti, Sujata Kartikeyan, says, “The aim is to bring women out of their homes and make them active participants in the development process, to empower them in true sense. Besides, money in the hand of women is always better than money in the hands of men because women will always spend it on education, health, and family”.

Furthermore, the involvement of SHG women in different Govt. department activities not only makes the operation process vibrant but will also ensure transparency by reducing the possibilities of corruption in the system. Most importantly, this is an opportunity for women to prove themselves, and there are plenty of cases where women have become successful only if they have given chances. This is just half of the story, but the other half is not only alarming but also noteworthy.

The Other Half of the Story

This scheme seems to take gender equality and women’s empowerment to the next level. Still, the practicality of this scheme remains a question unless it is fully implemented at the grass-root level. Apart from the implementation issue, it suffers from other shortcomings of an imbalance between the aims and lack of inclusivity of WSHGs. The Scheme appears to be meant only for a few SHGs who are already successful in doing business and can afford to get it done through lobby or nepotism. An interaction with Durga (name changed), who is the President of her group, revealed that from many SHGs in her Gram Panchayat, only her group got the contract of meter reading for the whole Gram Panchayat. Adding more to this story, she narrates, “as per the rule, only President or Secretary of the Group can appear for the exam; So, I wrote the exam, and by the grace of God I cleared since I got the question paper secretly before the exam from the Supervisor who is

my near relative. We also wanted to write another exam for the contract of providing mid-day meals in schools. Still, the supervisor said it wouldn't be beneficial like Meter reading, and it may create many problems in the future in terms of proving the quality of food. So, we decided not to go for that. Now, we are happy that our group got the contract. Still, at the same time, we have to deposit twenty thousand as a security deposit before getting this contract officially, which is beyond our capacity and reach". While discussing with other few Self Help Groups in the same Gram Panchayat, we came to know that none of them was aware of this exam nor did they get any prior notification, except one group who were aware but could not go because they got afraid after getting to know that they have to qualify in the exam if they want to get the contract. In light of this, it is clearer that this Scheme is exclusionary by keeping the criteria for qualifying the exam before getting the contract. The question is how many women among 6 Self Help Groups are literate to qualify the exam. And even if some of them are qualified, again, they are excluded by not getting the proper information about the procedure and criteria of the exam. Besides, there are Self Help Groups in the official records but not functional as they do not meet the official target of keeping a minimum number of members in the group, and that deprived them of accessing the benefits provided by the Govt. and this new Scheme in no way is going to benefit them. Adding to this, there are many women who are not in the official records due to scarcity of money, not getting approval from male members of their family to join the group, and inability to form a group due to shortage of members, etc. will be excluded from getting the benefits of this scheme as it is only meant for the members of SHGs.

The Way Forward

Undoubtedly, the SHG model is a noteworthy endeavor for women's empowerment. It is high time to go to the next orbit of women's empowerment by looking beyond the ad-hoc or quick heal process of savings and borrowing money to a sustainable growth model by fully implementing the above new scheme with an inclusive approach. Simultaneously, involving women with this scheme should be

decided on their skill and efficacy, and not by their qualifications or any kind of written exam. To make them skilled and efficient, we need to make information easily accessible, technology handling, marketing, and, most importantly, supply resources. Special care can be taken for those women who have left the group or not being able to form a group by giving special relaxation. We need to make sure that a single group or a few selected groups are not eating all the slices of cake by distributing different types of work among different eligible groups. Last but not the least, it needs a frequent field investigation by involving these WSHGs at the Panchayat level for carrying this scheme into a full-fledged manner, because many a time best policy with the good intention just does not work for whom it is meant to be. At the same time, it would be a foolish thing to blame the Govt. always; because 'you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink,' so, women should come forward to take their rightful positions by crossing the barriers of patriarchy.

The above raised issues are not meant to challenge the SHG model. Rather it's an appeal to take note of the above drawbacks before fully implementing the above-discussed scheme to make the state Odisha as a role model for other States to follow because Odisha is not just about poverty, malnutrition, and prone to natural disasters rather beyond it and what would be the best way, to begin with, other than the above new scheme where women will stand shoulder to shoulder with men in all the fields to make our nation healthy. Let us be hopeful that the scientific approaches in overcoming the lapses in implementation of the Scheme may boost to its success and enriching the WSHGs in their all-round development as planned and announced by the Govt. of Odisha.

References

- Aghion, Philippe and Patrick Bolton. "A Theory of Trickle-Down Growth and Development." *Review of Economic Studies*, vol. 64, no. 4, 1997, pp. 151-172.
- Armendáriz, Beatriz, and Jonathan Morduch. *The Economics of Microfinance*, MIT Press, 2005.
- Baland, Jean-Marie, et al. "Microfinance Lifespans: A Study of Attrition and Exclusion in Self-

- Help Groups in India.” *India Policy Forum*, vol. 4, 2008, pp. 159-210.
- Bhargava, Pradeep, and V.S. Vyas. “Public Intervention for Poverty Alleviation: An Overview.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 30, no. 41-42, 1995.
- Burgess, Robin and Rohini Pande. “Do Rural Banks Matter? Evidence from the Indian Social Banking Experiment.” *American Economic Association*, vol. 95, no. 3, 2005, pp. 780-795.
- Dasgupta, Rajaram. “Working and Impact of Rural Self-Help Groups and Other Forms of Microfinancing: An Informal Journey through Self-help Groups.” *Indian Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 2001, pp. 370-386.
- Dreze, Jean, and Amartya Sen. *Hunger and Public Action*, Clarendon Press, 1989.
- Fernandez, Aloysius P. “A Microfinance Institution with a Difference.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 42, no. 13, 2007, pp. 1185-1189.
- Fischer, Thomas, and M.S. Sriram. *Beyond Micro Credit: Putting Development Back into Micro-Finance*, Vistaar Publications, 2002.
- Ghate, Prabhu. *Microfinance in India: A State of the Sector Report*, Sage Publications, 2008.
- “Govt to Rope in Women SHGs for Development Works.” *Indian Express*, 2019.
- Impact and Sustainability of SHG Bank Linkage Programme in India*, NABARD, 2017.
- Leeladhar, V. “Taking Banking Services to the Common Man—Financial Inclusion.” *Reserve Bank of India Bulletin*, 2006, pp. 73-77.
- Madheswaran, S., and Amita Dharmadhikary. “Empowering Rural Women through Self-Help Groups: Lessons from Maharashtra Rural Credit Project.” *Indian Journal of Agricultural Economics*, vol. 56, no. 3, 2001, pp. 427-443.
- “Odisha: Patnaik announces 0% interest loan for SHGs.” *Business Standard*, 2019.
- Pitt, Mark M., and Shahidur Khandker. “The Impact of Group-Based Credit Programmes on Poor Households in Bangladesh: Does the Gender of Participants Matter?” *Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 106, no. 5, 1998, pp. 958-996.
- Puhazendi, V and K.C. Badataya. “SHG-Bank Linkage Programme for Rural Poor - An Impact Assessment.” *Seminar on SHG-bank Linkage Programme*, 2002.
- Rajasekhar, D. “Micro-finance Programmes and Women’s Empowerment: A Study of Two NGOs from Kerala.” *Journal of Social and Economic Development*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2000, pp. 76-94.
- Rangarajan, C. *Report of the Committee on Financial Inclusion*, RBI, 2008.
- Roodman, David, and Jonathan Morduch. “The Impact of Microcredit on the Poor in Bangladesh: Revisiting the Evidence.” *The Journal of Development Studies*, vol. 50, no. 4, 2014, pp. 583-604.
- Self Help Groups in India: A Study of Lights and Shades*, CARE, CRS, US AID and GTZ, 2006.
- Srinivasan, N. *Microfinance India: State of the Sector Report 2009*, Sage Publications, 2009.
- Swain, Ranjula Bali, and Fan Yang Wallentin. “Does Microfinance Empower Women? Evidence from Self Help Groups in India.” *International Review of Applied Economics*, vol. 23, no. 5, 2009, pp. 541-556.
- Swaminathan, Madhura. “The Microcredit Alternative?” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 42, no. 13, 2007.
- Vasimalai, M.P., and K. Narender. “Microfinance for Poverty Reduction: The Kalanjiam Way.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 42, no. 13, 2007, pp. 1190-1195.
- When Will We Ever Learn? Improving Lives through Impact Evaluation*, Report of the Evaluation Gap Working Group, 2006.
- Wilson, Kim. “The New Microfinance: An Essay on the Self-Help Group Movement in India.” *Journal of Microfinance*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2003, pp. 217-245.

Author Details

Saubhagyalaxmi Singh, Senior Research Fellow, Pondicherry University, Puducherry, India,
 Email ID: slsingh2013@gmail.com.