

## Empowerment of Savara Tribal Women among the Marginalized communities of India: An Ethnographic profile

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[The state of Andhra Pradesh (including Telengana) stands in seventh position with regard to density of tribal population in India consisting of 33 tribal groups. Among them 8 groups are considered as the most primitive tribal group (PTG)

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**Abstract** – The Savaras are mostly found in Southern Odisha and in north coastal Andhra Pradesh. According to 2011 Census the Savaras, numbering 1, 37, 613 (5.23%) are one of the most populous tribes in the state. They are also a prominent tribal community in Rayagada district of Odisha and specific pockets of Korapur and Gajapati districts. In Andhra Pradesh they are mainly found in the picturesque Palakonda hill ranges (part of Eastern Ghats) of Srikakulam, Vizianagaram and Visakhapatnam districts. Besides the Savara, three other important tribal communities, namely Jatapu, Kondadora and Gadaba inhabit the districts.

**Keywords:** Savara Tribe, Patrilineal, Polygyny, Kinship, Empowerment, Untouchability, Gutthi pani, Santha, Benevolent, Malevolent, Catholics .

### Introduction

**Origin:** Etymologically, in Sanskrit, Savara or Sabara means a mountaineer, since they are experts in climbing and hunting in the mountainous forest area. It is believed that Savaras were one of the indigenous tribes of pre-historic India. H.D. Sankalia was of the opinion that the bearers of the Nevasa – Nevadatoli culture as well as of the copper hoard belong to indigenous tribes, such as Nishads, Pulindas and Savaras. Those primitive might have made 3000-4000 years ago beautiful painted pottery and even copper tools and weapons (Swararao Delli et al: 2016).

The Savaras were the first tribal groups mentioned in the Hindu epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Lord Rama, when he was in search of Sita, is said to have met an aryanised Savara woman known as Sabari. She was known as the descendant of sage Viswamitra, who lived round about 800 BC. During Mahabharata, Sahithya Darpana mentioned that the Sabari and Ahiri dialects were spoken by the leaf-gathering and wood-cutting people, the Sabaras.

**Family set up:** In Savara tribal community father is the head of the family. Descent is patrilineal. Inheritance of property is also through father's line. All sons share the property of their father equally i.e. male equigeniture. The rule of residence is patrilocal. Neolocal residence is also common among them after marriage. However, when a man acquires his mate through marriage by service (Kinarsung or Illarikam), he agrees to stay either forever or for a fixed period in his father-in-law's house. Usually, this practice is confined in families having no male children. In such families women have a say in all economic activities. She is respected and regarded.

In a traditional Savara community, extended families are common, yet nuclear families are predominant among the Savaras. Monogamy is a rule but polygyny is also observed occasionally. So, these days we can notice polygynous family along with monogamous families in the Savara community. In a polygynous family all the women have equal role to play with regard to their dealings with the male members in the house. Family is the basic unit of the Savara community. This single unit of their social structure constitutes the nucleus and hub of their social life. The women play an educative role in a Savara family in bringing up their children in personal, social and community values.

Savara family is in transition now-a-days. When a conflict occurred between a father and his son or between a mother and her daughter the maternal uncle no longer comes to the scene to counsel the family and to offer strong advice to them, as it was earlier days. Even the parents are reluctant to intervene when their married son began striking his wife or mistreating his children. The consequence of this was loss of protection against suicide and incest and domestic abuse. What could be called the social safety net for the young was torn apart in Savara family structure. As the family became smaller, it gained considerable independence. At present the Savara family

is vulnerable to problems from which it had been protected by the larger kin group in the past. That's why the women's role in a family becomes more important. She not only begets the child but also brings up the child in human and societal values that protect and safeguard the integrity of family life in a Savara community.

When the family, the foundational social structure of a society is shaken, the whole edifice of family structure crumbles. When the well integrated family system begins to dissolve, the tremors are felt throughout the Savara culture. Thus empowerment of Savara women in their socio-economic and political aspects of life deserves paramount importance now.

**Kinship:** The Savara kinship terminology is mostly classificatory and a few of their kinship terms are descriptive. The terms of kinship applicable to relatives, consanguineous and affinal, are strikingly the same. All the male grandparents of the speaker both from the maternal and paternal side are classified by the only term 'Jojong'. All the female relatives of the third generation above the speaker are indicated by the term 'Yoyong'. The collateral and the lineal relatives are not kept distinct, but they are merged together and a single kinship term expresses the relationship.

**Kinship Terms:**

English term	Savara Term
Father	vang
Mother	Yeng
Grand father (M/P)	Jojong
Grand Mother (M/P)	Yoyong
Elder brother	Kakun
Elder Brother's wife	Boning/Kakin
Younger brother	Uba
Younger Brother's wife	Koyeng
Elder sister	Kaking
Younger sister	Aie
Wife	Dokkiri
Husband	Gaman
Father's elder brother	Thatha
Father elder brother's son	Kakun/Uba
Father's younger brother	Dadan
Father's younger brother's son	Kakun/Uba
Mother's elder sister	Anthalai
Mother's younger sister	Yayan
Wife's sister's husband	Saddu
Elder brother's wife	Bonni
Younger brother's wife	Koina
Wife's elder sister	Kinar
Wife's younger sister	Erriboi
Sister's husband	Baun

Kinship behavior which is universal in many societies such as avoidance and joking relationship are also very common among Savaras. They observe avoidance relation towards daughter-in-law, mother-in-law, father-in-law, younger brother's wife etc,. There is a strict distance maintained between elder brother-in-law (husband's elder brother) and younger sister-in-law (wife's younger sister). Similarly, avoidance is observed between son-in-law and his mother-in-law.

Joking relationship also is very common among the Savara families. An extreme degree of familiarity expressed through joking relationship between certain kin relation by way of cracking a satire, taunt, ridicule, exchange of abuse, obscene and vulgar references to sex etc. They observe joking relationship between consanguine groups such as grandchildren and grandparents, younger brother-in-law and elder sister-in-law (elder brother's wife), wife and husband. Radcliffe brown regards the joking relationship as having a symbolic meaning. Joking relations may

be only a kind of friendliness expressed by a show of hostility. Such relationship smoothens the tension arise in family members. Women play a catalytic role of human solidarity in a family.

**Marriage:** Savara people have extensive kinship networks. The kinship relations between villages are established through affinal relations i.e., marriage links. Marriage plays a very important role in kinship networks of Savaras. They follow strict endogamy at community level. The village endogamy is commonly approved and sanctioned by the Savara community. The breach of which is considered the breach of law and the sanctions may range from excommunication from the tribe or from the village community. The tribal council or tribal head (*Sabhabadi*) will impose sanctions and order others not to talk, associate, exchange things, maintain relations with those who are excommunicated. The Savaras in rare case do observe village exogamy, where only one *birinda* is inhabited in the entire village. In big villages having more than one *birinda* marriage are often arranged within the village.

Marriages are possible between a man and woman of his maternal side but not with maternal uncle's daughter. Only those who fail to arrange girls for their sons elsewhere select one of maternal cross-cousins for marriage (mother's brother's daughter). The father's sister being a member of the same *birinda* there is little scope for marriage with her children.

Serial monogamy is practiced by Savaras and limits themselves to one wife at a place. In case of divorce or death of wife, a Savara marries again and remains to be monogamous. Polygyny exists in two ways, sororal polygyny and non-sororal polygyny. In sororal polygyny the multiple wives of a Savara man are sisters. In non-sororal polygyny the multiple wives of a Savara man are not sisters.

In some situations when a Savara woman is not able to bear a child or she does not want her ancestral property to be divided she encourages her husband to marry her own sisters. This sororal- polygyny happens only when all the siblings are females without a single male to inherit the property in the family. Though property belongs to girls in a family where there is no male sibling, at the time of marriage of the girl, they look for a man (would be husband) of the girl, who can look after the girl's property. Consanguineous marriages between parallel cousins i.e. among brother's children or among sister's children are prohibited. Cross cousin marriages (FSD and MBD) are more common among the Savara.

**Three types of Tribal Marriages prominent among Savaras:** Dube (1969) classifies tribal marriages into three types (a) the ideal or general or regular marriage. The ideal marriage ceremony is arranged according to their religious norms and social customs by parents of both the boy and the girl. This is the preferential method of acquiring a mate among the Savara. This type of marriage by negotiation and mutual agreement (Penkui) which involves long procedure depending upon the talks between both parties takes place in every tribal family. (b) the non-ideal yet socially approved marriages are by elopement (Dingdengboi or Dandaboi), marriage by service (Kinarsung or Illarikam) and marriage by exchange (Ulaiboi). The non-ideal marriage like elopement and capture find certain social prestige. (c) the disrespectful marriage category has the lowest prestige and effected through force, intrusion, and so on. It is very interesting to note that among these primitive people, marriage by capture involves the elements of surprise and brute but not force and violence! This lead to dispute between the families of the boy and the girl, but eventually they get reconciled through the intervention of elders in the village.

Economic consideration is very crucial for the less number of marriages through negotiations. Because the marriage by negotiation is very costly involving considerable expenditure on gifts, liquor etc., So a large number of marriages take place by elopement. In marriage by elopement besides bride-price, liquor is served only on one occasion, when both families reconcile to their marriage; the couple is allowed to settle their family in their village. Marriage by elopement is comparatively less expensive.

Even though Savara understand the relationship between conception and sexual inter-intercourse, still they believe that human effort should be complemented by divine intervention. So they seek blessings of gods for the proper conception and delivery of the child. During the period of her pregnancy, she invariably avoids burial grounds and other places of evil spirits since they tend to believe to face the wrath of abortion or still-birth.

In some remote villages, delivery is always conducted outside the main house, either in the verandah or in their cattle shed. An enclosure is made by using *sarees* or bamboo reeds closing all the sides of the cattle shed to provide privacy for conducting delivery. As soon as she feels labour pain, she comes out of the house to sit on a stone in

the delivery enclosure, holding a strong rope sling that is hanging from the roof with her legs stretched wide apart. The “*Kudanboi*” (mid-wife) or any other elderly woman of the village conducts the delivery. But now-a-days the Government appointed nurses take the pregnant women to hospitals by the ambulance for pre-natal, delivery and post-natal care. Since there are many interior villages without proper road; people are unable to get ambulance facilities even at the time of emergency.

**Concept of Purity & Pollution:** After delivery both mother and child are given bath with hot water mixed with turmeric powder. The woman is considered to be under ‘birth – pollution’ till she is given purification bath. Until that time the woman is not allowed to touch anything in the house and she continues to stay in the enclosure in the verandah. After the purification bath she is allowed to enter into the house. But she should not touch any of the household articles. She is permitted to sleep on a cot confined to one corner of the house. Shaking hands with their guests and the outsiders as a sign of welcome is a common practice among them. But the woman in menstruation period avoids shaking hands with others. During the days of her period she avoids going to the hills and forest for work or collecting fire wood. Similarly after the death of a person in a family, all the household members are considered as polluted for a period of time. They do not hold or attend any functions or celebrations and avoid associating with others.

**Dress Pattern:** Savara’s traditional dress pattern has been changed drastically now-a-days. Men mostly wear *dotbi* and cover their upper part with towel. The women wear *saree* leaving it up to their ankle. The same *saree* covers their upper part as well as their head. But the younger generation wear blouse and tie their *saree* as any other non tribal woman. The Savara women use simple ornament to adorn themselves. A few necklaces of beads, round wooden plugs, spiral rings made of grass, bell metal or aluminum in the fingers and toes, little rings in the nose, metal anklets and colourful plastic bangles are worn by them. Garland made of colorful beads are preferred by them to be worn around their neck. The Savara women do not accumulate gold ornaments as valuable things they should possess.

**Food Habits:** In general the Savara people are non-vegetarians and eat fowl, pork, beef, goat, fish, dry fish, wild boar, wild sheep, rabbit etc. They also consume potato, tubers like *savadi dbumpa*, *donda dbumpa*, *adavi dbumpa* found in the forest. Their staple food is rice and jowar. They used to consume millets in the past, but now they take rice since subsidized supply of rice through Public Distribution System (PDS) is available to them. They consume varieties of pulses, green leaves, edible wild fruits etc. They rarely consume dairy products. They are not much interested in maintaining vegetable gardens, because most of them buy vegetables from the weekly markets (*Santha*). They drink country liquor extracted from *vippa* flowers commonly found in the forest. Alcohol consumption is also common among them and they buy mostly when they go to weekly markets. They are fond of fermented liquor (Kallu) extracted from palm trees. Till today we do not find any liquor shop existing in any of the tribal villages around Seethampeta. Those who visit Palakonda and Kothuru towns bring beer and other bottled beverages to their villages. But by and large liquor consumption among the Christian tribal is uncommon to a great extent.

**Work Culture as an indigenous knowledge:** Agriculture, especially podu or shifting cultivation is the mainstay of the Savara people. Every family member works in the field or mountainous forest, whatever may be their physical condition.

They depend on “slash and burn cultivation” (swidden) which does not require any sophisticated technological input. The forest on the hills is considered as a communal property of the people though the divided portions of the land are looked after by many families. The members make a collective decision in selecting podu lands according to a number of criteria - some ecological and some social. With regard to ecological criteria, they restrict site selection by excluding too rocky or too steep mountain range as agriculturally not fit for podu. In some places the entire hill slope is occupied by the people from one village. Others do not intrude into the land portion which belongs to a particular village. Podu plots are difficult to irrigate since one has to depend on rainfall to raise the successful crops throughout the year. Failure in rainfall results in failure of crops. So generally now-a-days, they prefer settled cultivable land near hill streams than cultivation in podu plots. Terraced cultivation is mainly practiced by those living along the foothill of Palakonda or near the plains of hill streams.

Most of the Savara people living around Seethampeta in Srikakulam Districts do possess small plots of land on the hill terrains to cultivate paddy and cashew. They cultivate turmeric, zinger, pineapple, clustered-apple, plantain,

mangoes, tamarind, red gram and maize. The minor forest produce such as *adda* leaves for leaf plates, yams like *adavi vaimu*, *savadi dhumpa*, *donda dhumpa*, *sheekai*, soapnuts, hill brooms and honey are gathered and taken to the weekly markets (*Santha*) for sale. They do not cultivate in large quantity to sell them in market to make more money. They cultivate what they need only. Despite their hard labour their land does not produce as much as they want because of uncertainty of rain, unfertile soil added to poor irrigation facility. The land is full of rocks, stones, thorns and thistles. However an individual family members work hard in their portion of land throughout the year, still they find difficult to clear the thorny bushes from the land completely and make it cultivable. Most portion of their land is left fallow.

*Gutthi pani* (Group work) a kind of work culture among the Savaras is one of the indigenous knowledge systems prevalent even today. In many villages they do practice *Gutthi pani*. The Savara's economy is not market oriented economy that aims at making more money and gaining maximum profit. Rather it is 'subsistence' economy, oriented towards the survival of the household members. Their system of production, distribution and consumption cater to day-to-day needs of the people for their sustenance and survival.

The practice of *Gutthi Pani* in Savara tribal community enables them to attend to their fallow land and make it conducive for cultivation with the help of other people in the same tribal community. *Gutthi Pani* means "group work" as we know. A family is helped by the community members by extending their labour. The elders of the Adivasi community assign number of people to work in the land of a particular family. In some tribal hamlets, the one who seeks help, goes to each house and requests them to come to his field to work. The family which gets the help of the labour force from the community has to provide a meal for all of them and end of the day each labourer is given Rs. 100 which is a nominal wage for one day work. Thus the community supports the individual family with collective labour force. Since many Adivasi families are very poor and they could not afford to give a meal and Rs. 100 each, their land remains fallow for many years.

The work culture of *Gutthi Pani* is "other centered" – involves cooperation and collaboration of every individual member in the community. The process of decision making is more democratic which fosters communal solidarity. The views of the elders are respected and followed up. Ultimately it strengthens their unity and fellowship. A tangible expression of compassion and solidarity intertwined in this indigenous practice of group work (*Gutthi Pani*) among the Savaras is in fact praise worthy.

**Caste percolates in tribal society:** Though the Savara tribal live in an egalitarian society, there is a social cleavage among the people of Savara, Kondadora, Gadaba and Jathapu in this locality. Since the Jathapu who reside on the plains having access to education, employment, transport, communication and other modern facilities and mostly they live in nearby towns, they consider the Savaras socially backward and economically impoverished. There is a tendency that the Jathapus somewhat look down upon the Savaras who still remain illiterate compared to them. As far as the Savara people possess land and cultivate them on their own, there may not be any threat to their dignity and tribal identity in their egalitarian tribal community. But if they mortgage or sell or lose their land and start working in the fields of others for daily wage, then the disparity among them will lead to caste hierarchy, which is sure to percolate in tribal way of life in a more deceptive manner!

**Prevalence of Untouchability:** Now, if we think of the origin of the institution of untouchability, we find that in ancient India, as people took to different trades and professions, they were classified according to their association and allegiance to work. If some one's work was of a clean and pure in nature, he/she was regarded as 'high'; if it were dirty and unclean, such person was looked down upon as 'low' compared to others.

Dr. Ambedkar propounded a unique thesis to explain how some are treated as untouchables or as a separate class. He writes that in the beginning, people led a nomadic life. Later on, some settled down. There were always fights and battles between the nomadics and the settled people. The defeated people came to be known as the 'Broken Men'. These Broken Men did not know where to go for shelter or whom to approach for protection. On the other hand, the settled people had to constantly face the challenge of watching and guarding their dwelling places from the attacks of the outsiders. The work of guarding the locality of the settled people was assigned to the 'Broken Men' who were made to live outside the village as guards. Later on these 'Broken Men' came to be regarded as outcastes and untouchables. Dr. Ambedkar says that they were not the people who were first declared as untouchables and then deported out of the villages but they were the people who from the very beginning lived outside the village and were subsequently declared as untouchables.



**Religious beliefs:** The Savaras are highly religious with each and every natural phenomenon attributed to the works of some Gods, deities or spirits of folk religion. The Savaras' religion is very elaborate and deep rooted. The Savaras still practice shamanic culture. They are polytheist and believe in large number of deities and ancestral spirits. Therefore, the customary laws, values, norms are highly respected by all members of the society for the fear of inviting personal or communal harms.

A shaman, usually a woman, serves as an intermediary between the two worlds. During a trance, her soul is said to climb down to the underworld, leaving her body for the dead to use as their vehicle for communication. People crowd around the shaman, arguing vehemently with the dead, laughing at their jokes, or weeping at their accusations. According to Savara thinking, death is not the end of life, but merely another phase. After death one becomes a powerful spirit. The Savara believe in many supernatural powers. To ensure their protection and success in their lives, various deities are propitiated. These deities and supernatural powers are classified into Benevolent and Malevolent. Benevolent deities are revered and propitiated to secure their well being and sustained blessings. Malevolent deities are feared and offered bloody sacrifices to appease them and escape their wrath. Sickness, ill luck and other difficulties are attributed to the work of malevolent deities. Diagnosis and treatment of sickness involve a series of magico-religious practices besides administering herbal medicine. The native doctor is known as vejjudu.

**Hinduism and animism are two separate faiths:** Delliswararao K in his *Ethnographic Analysis of Savara Tribe in India* observes that now-a-days a move by Hindu groups to convert the Savara to Hinduism is taking place leading to conflict and tension in this area.

The religion of Savaras is understood in two different ways. There is one school of thought speaks that Savaras are not Hindus but there is a superficial imposition of Hinduism on them. Hence the other school believes that they are Hindus. A Savara makes offerings to certain Hindu deities and calls himself a Hindu for no better reason than that he believes. His/her allegiance to Hinduism improves his social status and elevates him/her in the social ladder. The following reasons are generally given in order to argue that the Savaras are not Hindus:

- They do not perform rituals and worship before Hindu idols.
- They do not enter Hindu temples.
- They do not have idols in their houses.
- They do not employ Brahmin priests for any of the ceremonies such as birth, marriage, and death but employ their own "Vajjudu"
- They live in great fear of evil spirits and most of their religious practices are endeavors to propitiate these spirits which always seem bent upon harming them.

The best approach to analyze the religion of the Savara will be to study its features and characteristics in terms of (a) worship of God, (b) propitiation of spirits and ghosts, and (c) various beliefs.

But the Savaras who adopted Christianity approach the Parish Priest (in case of Catholics) or the Pastors (in case of Protestant) for blessings and keep vigil in the churches for healing. According to them death is not the end of existence, but merely another phase. After death one becomes a powerful spirit. The Christian belief in resurrection (life after death) also synchronizes with theirs.

**Presence of Christianity:** In the recent past, many of the traditional Savaras' beliefs have undergone change due to Christianity and teachings of missionaries. In many areas the shamanic and animist beliefs are only distant memories. The presence of Christianity in this region also goes back to more than hundred years of its existence. A small church dedicated to mother Mary situated on a small hillock near the village Goidhi symbolizes the presence of their Christian faith. The surrounding villages which adopted Christian faith regularly visit this Marian shrine on the Goidhi hillock. Talking to the Parish priest Fr. N. Kishore SJ, a Jesuit working among the Savara tribe (in the year 2016) narrates, "The Story of Goidi Fatima Mata Tribal Shrine goes back to century old story when the Christian missionaries from the Vizag MSFS province used to work in the bordering areas of Andhra and Orissa. Their Missions were located at the nearby places namely Palakonda, Palavalasa, Kottur, Battili & Nallarayaguda. The missionaries chose Goidi hill as a place to build a church as it is accessible by the road. The

hillock was partially leveled. They built a church that stood on the hill for more than hundred years. Beside this church they built a small house with two rooms. One for him to stay and the other room where the priest used to shelter his horse on which he used to travel to reach the remote tribal villages in those days. The house was strongly built to resist heavy wind and it was strong enough to protect them from wild animals. The missionary work resulted in conversion of a few Jatapu and Savara tribal communities". The Savara men, women with their children visit this Marian shrine regularly to pray. Occasionally they render *sramadan* (free service) to clean the church surrounding on the hill.

### Challenges of women empowerment among Savara:

1. *Active participation of members:* The primary challenge facing women today is to increase their participation and become actively involved in decision making (Chandra, 1997). Participation has two dimensions – quantitative and qualitative. People's participation in terms of numbers has no meaning. Today there is a need for change from quantitative to qualitative. Active participation in social, economic and political spheres would help in enhancing process of decisions making and empowerment. It will also give women the desired self-respect and social dignity which are the pre-requisites of empowerment.
2. *Uniqueness of Tribal community:* The socio-economic structure in tribal communities is markedly different from that of the non-tribal or advanced groups of people. The tribal community has a very simple technology, which fits well with their ecological surroundings. Moreover their economy can be said to be of subsistence type. They practice different types of occupations to sustain themselves and live on 'marginal economy'. Projects and programmes should aim at involving women in economic activities apart from their role in family maintenance.
3. *Saving dimension among the tribe:* A tribe is usually considered an economically independent group of people having their own specific economy and thus having economic status. Most of them do not think for tomorrow as they live in today. So saving is not at all a part of their life. But as a matter of fact, Self Help Groups (SHGs) are started with the concept of savings only. So in the initial stage of formation of SHG, the real problem arises in motivating them to save and to regularize the savings.

### Need to Focus on Women empowerment among the Savaras:

- a. Savara women have little financial independence at home. This makes banks reluctant to finance for projects and programmes. NGOs and other stakeholders should come forward to assist them financially.
- b. Given the patriarchal notions of the Indian society, in general women are perceived with contempt and suspicion. They are not easily trusted by the rest of the community. Yet the women need to be mobilized, trained and taught to take up leadership role in their community.
- c. Low literacy level among the rural poor especially among the rural tribal women proves to be a major barrier. Adult education and skill training has to be implemented in order to empower them.
- d. In our country, usually the poor people in time of their emergency run to the landlords and money lenders (*Shavukarlū*) for their credit needs. They lend money usually at a very high interest. Eventually the women are vulnerable to the middle men, leading to their exploitation. To avoid this situation community corpus fund has to be created involving every member of the tribal household to be responsible.
- e. Help from the Government and NGOs don't often follow need-based loan disbursement and usually loans are equally distributed among all members. This leads to improper utilization of funds. Thus wider consultation with the local people has to be initiated and the decision should flow from the people especially from women groups.
- f. Hardly we find the projects and programmes focus on investment potential and improvement of their skills. Thus freebies should be avoided and subsidies could be given if necessary.
- g. A serious scrutiny and understanding of the tribal community should become the focus of development. It is important to know which gender among different community is the working force and who can be entrepreneur and decision maker. Promoting entrepreneurial spirit among them is very important. It enables to push them up the economic ladder.
- h. The varied needs of the people and their diverse culture need to be considered seriously, lest resulting into success in one place and failure in another place.
- i. Failure to develop proper audit mechanism leads to widespread corruption. So, they should be taught to be transparent and accountable to the community regarding their financial dealings.
- j. Every development project and programme emerged with the tremendous support from the Government of India and state governments. As a result in many cases it gave the ruling party a political mileage.

### Indicators of Women Empowerment:

Empowerment has been defined broadly as “the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable the institutions that affect their lives” (Narayan, 2003).

The 4<sup>th</sup> World Conference on women held at Beijing in 1995 proposed the following qualitative and quantitative indicators for evaluating women’s empowerment.

#### Qualitative Indicators

- Increase in self-esteem
- Increase in knowledge and awareness levels on issues affecting the community, such as women’s health, nutrition, reproductive rights, legal rights, literacy, etc.
- Change in the women’s role and responsibility in the family and community.
- Visible increase or decrease in levels of domestic violence and other forms of violence perpetrated on women and girl child.
- Change in social and other customs e.g. Child marriage, dowry, discrimination against widows, etc.
- Visible changes in women’s participation in attending public meetings, training programmes.
- Increase in bargaining/negotiating power of women as an individual as well as in collectives.
- Formation of cohesive women’s groups at village, district and state levels.
- Recognition of women’s economic contribution within and outside the household.
- Women’s decision- making over her work, income and expenditure in her control.

#### Quantitative Indicators

- Demographic trends like – maternal mortality rates, fertility rates, sex ratio, life expectancy at birth, and average age of marriage.
- Number of women participating in different development programmes.
- Greater access and control over community resources governmental schemes.
- Visible changes in health nutritional status and changes in literacy.
- Participation levels of women in political process at the local level.

**Women Empowerment through Self Help Groups and Micro–Credit Unions:** Self Help Groups (SHGs) and Micro-Credit Unions (MCUs) enhance the equality of status of women as participants, decision-makers and beneficiaries in the democratic, economic social and cultural spheres of life. In all stages of social and economic activities involvement of women becomes essential. Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Nation has stated, “Women are the noblest of God’s Creation, supreme in their own sphere of activity”. These local financial institutions bring out the supremacy of women in moulding the community in right perspective and explore the initiative of women in taking up entrepreneurial ventures. These models rely on development through empowerment and not subsidies. Repayment procedure is also flexible and it proclaims ‘Self Help through mutual help for common good’. It is an ideal combination of one’s rights and responsibilities.

Rathidevi (2009) comments that SHG is mainly concerned with the poor. SHG is for the people, by the people and of the people. It focuses on the weaker sections, particularly women, for their social defense and contains great potential to create awareness on day-to-day affairs. It promotes saving habit, develops self and community assets, increases the income level, social power, generates confidence, self-scrutiny and self-reliance. Thus, it is a mechanism to extend mutual help and support through sharing ideas, experiences, information, resources and other services. The groups may be viewed as a process or an institution for socio economic transformation leading to empowerment of women.

She further adds, empowerment literally means, ‘Becoming powerful’. Women empowerment is a process whereby women are able to organize themselves to increase their own self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choices and control resources, which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination (Rathidevi 2009).

Margaret (1949) described three levels of empowerment. The first is the awakening of individual consciousness;



the second, is development of collective consciousness; and the third, is at the level of translating collective skills and resource into political and legal action, ultimately leading to women's empowerment.

Mohini (1998) defines empowerment as a process whereby women become enlightened, and thus, increase their own self-reliance to assert their independent right to make choice and control resources that assist in challenging and eliminating the factors that subjugate them. Thus the concept of SHGs is that of helping oneself for development through one another. SHGs enable women to look at old problems in new ways, analyze their environment and situations, recognize their strength, and alter their self image.

Sohoni (1994) asserts empowerment to be a process that starts with awareness from individual consciousness, grows with action and broadens at the collective level. Individually poor rural women cannot overcome powerlessness; collectively they can. Their strength is in organization. The members gain a feeling of confidence by being a member of a women's group that is working on the problems of the poor.

According to Suguna (2001), "empowerment is a process of awareness and capacity building leading to greater participation to greater decision-making power and control, and transformation action". Empowerment of women means leading them to socially developed, politically active, and economically productive. Empowerment makes them independent and enables them to make informed choices and intelligent decisions in matters that affect them and their nation.

Actually empowerment is an active, multi-dimensional process, which enables women to realize their full potential and powers in all spheres of life. Power is not a commodity to be transacted, nor can it be given away as alms. Power has to be acquired and once acquired it needs to be exercised, sustained and preserved (Pillai, 1995). Empowerment literally means 'becoming powerful'. In short, empowerment is a process of challenging existing power relations and of gaining greater control over the sources of power. Empowerment is attained through awareness and capacity building leading to greater participation in decision-making process, control and transformative action.

**Conclusion:** Any community that stands at the threshold of development and progress has to concentrate more on the empowerment of women. The Savara tribal community which is still considered as Primitive tribal group (PTG) deserves all our attention. Special focus on their economic development will certainly lead to all other developments. A study on Development of SHGs in India done by V.M. Rao, reveals that the existing formal financial institutions have failed to provide finances to landless marginalized and disadvantaged groups. SHGs encourage savings and promote income-generating activities through small loans. The experiences available in the country and elsewhere suggest that SHGs are sustainable, have explicability, stimulate savings, and in the process help borrowers to come out of vicious circle of poverty (V.M. Rao, 2002). Thus starting Self Help Groups (SHGs) and Micro-Credit Unions (MCUs) are the potential pathway to their empowerment and their overall development.

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