

Preface and Acknowledgement

Rural poverty, unemployment and exploitation are phenomena which I am not entirely unfamiliar with. My childhood days and adolescence spent in a remote village of Keshpur in West Bengal made me face the bitter realities of hunger, homelessness, deprivation and even violence. I had often been bewildered at the conditions of the rural women whose tears had even ceased to flow after years of malnourishment and social exploitation. However, I had no idea as to how to address these problems as I had not ever seen any other economic activity being carried out in my village except farming and cattle rearing. It was after my post graduation when I saw my teacher Prof. S.N.Dhar working with Self Help Groups around the university and interacting with NGOs and government officials for devising micro-entrepreneurial projects for rural women. My real interests in microfinance developed only when I read the works of Prof. Yunus and later worked as a project assistant under Prof. Dhar. My inspiration for working with SHGs also stemmed from the views of Prof. Yunus, who realised that pure academics could not be instrumental in delivering the goods that a poverty stricken nation essentially and immediately needed. I decided that I would help some of these groups with the accounting and financial management skills that I acquired during my post graduation. During my interaction with the SHGs I got a first hand knowledge of their problems, perceptions and aspirations. My desire to convert these experiences into research was inspired by my guide. We observed in the year 2000 that a new self employment programme, the SGSY was gradually taking shape in many areas of North Bengal. Though very slow at the initial stages, erstwhile DW CRA groups were being converted into SHGs and some dynamism and motivation was being noticed among bank and Government officials. A detailed reading of the guidelines and operational instructions of SGSY somehow made me believe that this was a scheme which would not be phased out soon. My beliefs were slowly turning into reality when I saw the number of SHGs growing at a galloping rate in North Bengal especially in the districts of Jalpaiguri and Coochbehar. I then chose to research on the scheme on a holistic basis encompassing outreach, group operations, bank linkages, and involvement of stakeholders, perceptions of bankers and beneficiaries and finally impact on the beneficiaries. In order to have a grass root understanding of these issues I spent about a couple of years conducting surveys, formal interviews and informal discussions with government officials, bankers, panchayats, NGOs and frequent visits to SHG meetings where I could talk to the beneficiaries. My endeavours ultimately resulted in drafting of this thesis. Survey research has its own limitations and as such this study is not free from such limitations. Expansion of the area in which the study was carried out and/or expanding the sample may have led to better results. But considering the constraints, costs and rigours of this type of research the focus area was restricted to a district. However, there should not be a final

closing whistle for any research and I cherish the dreams of advancing this research in future. The work is not only the fruits of my endeavours alone, but also the cooperation and help I received from many individuals.

I would first like to express my affectionate and deeply felt gratitude to my teacher and supervisor, Prof. Samirendra Nath Dhar, Dept. of Commerce, North Bengal University for his valuable guidance, suggestions, supervision and critical comments at all stages of my work. It is his generous encouragement, inspiration and interest that helped me a lot to continue and finish my present work. In spite of heavy pressure of work and pre-occupation he always spent his precious time in going through this thesis. Indeed I am fortunate enough to have him as my supervisor. I owe the greatest debt to him.

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Soumitra Sarkar
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