



Mahila Samakhya: A model for empowerment of rural women's of Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract

The Mahila Samakhya (MS) Programme was initiated in 1987-89, for the education and empowerment of women in rural areas, particularly of women from socially and economically marginalized groups. The current paper draws the importance of this program and elucidates the measures which government has taken to empower women. The paper focuses on one of the most populated states of the country Uttar Pradesh and shares its success stories of the state. The paper further draws the objectives of the program and highlights the changes that are brought by this program in the life of the women.

Keywords: Mahila Samakhya, empowerment, rural India, policies

Introduction

The provision of educational opportunities for women has been an important part of the national endeavor in the field of education since independence. Though these endeavors did yield significant results, gender disparities persist with uncompromising tenacity, more so in rural areas and among disadvantaged communities. The National Policy on Education (NPE, 1986) as revised in 1992 was a landmark in the field of policy on women's education in that it recognized the need to redress traditional gender imbalances in educational access and achievement. Thus to translate the goal of NPA, a foundation was laid for empowerment at the grassroots level with the organization of cohesive Mahila Sanghas (Women's Collectives), though different in form and size that they are committed to collective action to address their own issues.

Review of national policies towards women empowerment

The last decade has seen a growing importance of the term empowerment. While the term has been used for the poor and the deprived groups, it has now been used even more extensively with regard to women's programs. As a matter of fact, most state governments now consider it desirable to offer women's empowerment programs in order to alleviate poverty and to bring about women's development. Considering the widespread use of the term, it was decided to understand what the term connotes for such government programs and to understand how the term has got translated into programs that are run by the government as well as by non-government organizations (NGOs).

It was the Sixth Five Year Plan in which the focus on women's interests shifted from 'welfare' and 'development'. Planners and policy makers began to recognize women not only as partners but also as stake-holders in the development of the country. The Seventh Five Year Plan saw developmental programmes which aimed at raising the economic and social status of women and at ensuring that they

get the benefits of national development. This is when 'beneficiary oriented programmes extending direct benefits to women in different developmental sectors began. There was a stress upon the generation of both skilled and unskilled employment through formal and non-formal education and vocational training. The Eight Five Year Plan had a Human Development focus. It tried to ensure that the benefits of development do not bypass women and it implemented special programmes for women to complement the general development programmes and to monitor the flow of benefits to women in education, health and employment. The Ninth Five Year Plan was rather ambitious. It took up 'empowering women as agents of socio-economic change and development' as a major commitment. To begin with, it adopted the 'National Policy for Empowerment of Women', which among other objectives, sought to organize women into Self Help Groups to work for their own empowerment, accorded a high priority to schemes for maternal and child welfare and most importantly, made a bid at easy and equal access to education through the Special Action Plan of 1998, plans for the free education of girls up to the college level (inclusive of professional courses) and vocational training. The core objective of Tenth Five Year Plan was to universalizing access to primary education and improvement of basic school infrastructure with special focus to all SC/STs girls and women. The Eleventh Five Year Plan envisions inclusive growth as a key objective. Where Inclusion mean recognizing women's organization and voice as central to institutional, social and economic arrangements for sculpting a just and equitable society. Whereas the approach to Twelfth Five Year Plan will be to have more, faster, sustainable and more inclusive growth. Thus, to achieve the mentioned goal the 'Women' should not be just a topic to be addressed, but women should permeate through the approach as a means for achieving inclusion and development. There is a need to Put young women, and young adolescent girls at the center of the approach.

Mahila Samakhya Programme

The Mahila Samakhya (MS) Programme was initiated in 1987-89, for the education and empowerment of women in rural areas, particularly of women from socially and economically marginalized groups. The programme was initially launched in ten districts of, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh with Dutch assistance. To achieve the goal of women empowerment through education, the MS has adopted an innovative approach that emphasizes the process rather than mere mechanical fulfillment of targets. It does not provide only basic literacy skills rather it emerged as a learning process, to bring women together to collectively solve their problems & empower them to address a wide variety of issues themselves and seeking their solutions. It endeavors to create an environment for women to learn at their own pace, set their own priorities and seek knowledge and information to make informed choices. It seeks to bring about a change in women's perception about themselves and the perception of society in regard to women's "traditional roles". This essentially involves enabling women, especially from socially and economically disadvantaged and marginalized groups, to address and deal with problems of isolation and lack of self confidence, oppressive social customs, struggles for survival, all of which inhibit their learning. It is in this process that women become empowered. Thus, the programme helped the education to reach at the door step of the rural women.

Objective of the scheme

Education is an instrument of socialization is considered as a powerful catalytic agent for social change. Mahila Samakhya is the most effective change agent for the improvement of the socio-economic conditions of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, removal of their disabilities and acceleration of the integrated process. Thus, the predominant composition of the Mahila Sanghas is SC/ST women belonging to land-less and marginalized families engaged in wage labor. Bringing these women into Sanghas makes them active agents in their own and other women's empowerment. The idea behind founding Mahila Sanghas was to enable women to affirm their potential and to move from situations of passive acceptance to assertion and collective action. The Mahila Samakhya Scheme was to create independent collectives of women to initiate and sustain social change.

Organizational Structure

The Mahila Samakhya programme is implemented through autonomous registered societies at the state level. These are sponsored by the Centre through a complex organizational structure that involves a State Programme Office and a District Implementation Unit which forms a Federation of Mahila Sanghas. The body that is actually responsible for the implementation of the Mahila Samakhya Scheme is the MS Block Resource Unit which works under the supervision of the Federation. A woman facilitator known as a Sahyogini is responsible to the Mahila Sangha for every cluster of 10 villages. The State MS Society Executive Committee comprises of the representatives of the Government of India, National Resource Group (Gender and development expert academicians), NGOs and programme personnel.

Experience of the MS Programme

The Mahila Samakhya programme is a unique one which focuses on the education of women, who have been left out of the education system. The experience of the programme over the past fourteen years, in different regional contexts, has validated the MS approach as an effective means to mobilize and organize women, and in enabling them to take charge of their lives. This has resulted in many other sectoral programmes seeking to link with MS or adopt/adapt MS strategies. The programme informed strategies adopted in other countries of Africa and Asia. The Mahila Samakhya Programme was awarded the honorary literacy award of UNESCO in 2001. The effects of this education are visible in MS areas and can be seen in the initiatives taken by Sanghas in all the States to address issues/problems ranging from: i) meeting daily minimum needs; ii) improving civic amenities; iii) gaining control over health and nutrition; iv) actively accessing and controlling resources; v) ensuring educational opportunities for their children especially girls; vi) entering the political sphere and participation in political activities; vii) articulating their concerns and tackling social issues like violence against women, viii) child marriage, devadasi, dowry etc., ix) seeking and obtaining literacy and numeracy skills for themselves and their daughters. The Programme gradually generated the demand for literacy among member groups, improved the recognition and visibility within the family, community and block levels has increased -- leadership qualities have been developed and a cadre of village level organizers and activists are emerging, and in addition increased the participation in Pachayati Raj Bodies.

Mahila Samakhya in Uttar Pradesh

Mahila Samakhya Uttar Pradesh is a unique initiative. A government programme, it has the passion and commitment of a voluntary agency, energy of a movement and the synergies of a systemic organisation. Its goals are broader and longer term in nature than a 'scheme', as it seeks to bring about change in the situation of women, in terms of equality and empowerment. MS works towards enabling women to bring about a change in their own situation, while also helping society become equity-oriented. Thus, MS works on society in general, but also through social and political institutions, government departments and agencies, and through a larger advocacy in society. The main action plan in Uttar Pradesh includes Rights and governance, Education, Health and Economic Empowerment.

Broad objectives include

1. Providing women and adolescent girls with the necessary support structure and informal learning environment to create opportunities for education. Enhance the self-image and self-confidence of women and thereby enabling them to recognize their contribution to the economy as producers and workers.
2. Create an environment where women can seek knowledge and information and thereby empower them to play a positive role in their own development and development of society.
3. Mahila Samakhya programme had envisaged this pragmatic form of education. All MS activities related to

encouragement and promotion of education.

4. Mahila Samakhya was mostly used for Spreading awareness on laws relating to women's right and welfare.

To achieve the above mentioned objective of "Education for Equality", the below mentioned techniques are adopted by the Mahila Samakhya in Uttar Pradesh.

Educational Initiatives

Include Balkendra, Kishori Kendra, Mahila Saksharta Kendra, Library, Literacy camps, Bridge courses, Enrolment campaign, Teachers accountability campaign, Jatha, Nukkad natak, Wall writing.

Strategies and Innovations

DIU level - education core team (Sahyogini+DIU) visit regularly and Support in teaching methodology. Monitoring has been done by teachers through Monthly/six monthly tests, Quarterly by DIU, Six monthly by other district/state person, Regular visits by state representative and Yearly evaluation by state/district team. The Sangha intervene by identifying best locations, gender friendly environment, selection of teachers, preparation of curriculum along with the arranging for Mid Day Meal- Cooking and Quality check, distribute books, scholarships, ensures the Enrolment of girls and their retention, Community Mobilization.

Exposure of Mahila Samakhya: A Success in Uttar Pradesh

The Mahila Samakhya programme in Uttar Pradesh has expanded from four districts in 1989 to 16 districts in 2000. Following the bifurcation of Uttar Pradesh four of these districts became a part of the newly created State Uttaranchal. Thus, presently there are 12 districts under the coverage of MS in Uttar Pradesh. Expansion to these areas has been based on low female literacy rates, high prevalence of socially marginalized groups and high incidence of violence against women. The rate of expansion is a cause for concern given the fact that there are a large number of areas that qualify for inclusion.

Mahila Shikshan Kendras are emerging as centres of mainstream education. Launched in Banda, one of the districts with the lowest female literacy in Uttar Pradesh, MSKs are also being set up in Varanasi and Saharanpur. The MSKs are drawing in girls and women who have been school dropouts or never enrolled at all, but whose desire for learning is paramount. MSKs are able to make education more attractive to women and girls in rural areas as the subjects chosen and the methods used to disseminate knowledge were rooted in the specific context of the village or block. Thus prospective students through group discussions decided that they wanted more information about land; water; forests; and the village community. Both students and the teachers were involved in the process of developing materials and lessons for each subject. Teachers were chosen from among those running literacy classes in the village. In addition, as students were weak in language and math's abilities but had a lot of information to share, the teachers were selected with a view to provide students with inputs and helping them make best use of information available. It is envisaged that the MSKs will soon broaden the area of work, provide skill training in

traditional and non-traditional areas. MSKs are the latest innovation in linking education to women's empowerment. However, they only cap a series of achievements in making education relevant to the needs of local women and girls and ensuring that it is provided at a pace, set by the women themselves.

Over the past few years, the 76 Mahila saksharta kendras spread over the four Samakhya districts have attempted to meet the growing demand for education. Beginning with literacy camps, organized for sakhis and sangha women in Banda district, the effort to learn more was translated into mahila saksharta kendras for neo-literate women. At the learning centers, women would gather every day to learn together. Also a newsletter, Mahila Dakiya, or the women's post, was launched. Published bimonthly, it is widely circulated in the area.

In Banda, UP, women trained as hand pump mechanics became literate via the language of hand pump maintenance. Women have begun to effectively address the issues of girl child education in addition to their own education. Sanghas are active partners in the diverse educational initiatives of the programme. The Udan Khatolas in U.P. all provide a creative learning opportunity. Sanghas assist in selecting teachers, monitoring the centers, mobilizing the community for education and in some cases (as in Uttar Pradesh) make some financial contribution as well. MS is publishing newspapers/broad-sheets. The Khabar Lahariya (News Waves) was launched in May 2002 is written produced and sold by low-caste rural poor's and Barely literate women in the local language Bundeli. This fortnightly newspaper is a thriving and respected concern with a readership of over 25,000 in more than 400 villages in the Chitrakoot and Banda districts of Uttar Pradesh. Now, it has won international recognition through the award of the 2009 UNESCO King Sejong Literacy Prize.

Mahila Shikshan Kendra (Women's Residential Schools) the 12 district-level residential schools are being run on a regular basis. The first batches of women were enrolled in 1995. In 1997 the first batch of adolescent girls were enrolled in Varanasi. As many as 4635 Kishories/women were made literate and out of them 3414 brought into the mainstream and have passed class V examination. NPEGEL-Improving girl child education begins in 2003-04 with 48 schools and extended up to 107 schools in 119 Nyay Panchayats of 12 districts. it also manage Uniforms, toys and swings, Bicycles/Rikshas for girls and organize 108 Meena Manch, 105 Bal kendras, libraries facilities. Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya is presently functioning in 10 districts with around 795 girls benefiting from it.

Conclusion

While the direct impact of the MS educational strategy is yet to be fully felt, its impact is most visible in the confidence with which Sanghas are playing an active role in village education committees, making schools work, ensuring the teachers come regularly and in many instances ensuring that in their villages, children, particularly girl children, have access to formal education. But the major problem that is being faced is the lack of personnel to actually provide time and inputs in new areas. Many positions have been lying vacant at the

district level and this has impacted the expansion process have impacted the expansion process and has severely limited monitoring, nurturing and mentoring expansion activities. Hence, this has not been a linear process of learning and empowerment. There have been many crests and troughs, several steps backwards before a step could be taken forward. The zest and drive of the women has kept the programme vibrant.

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