

# Mahila Samakhya: A Reflection

A programme with a difference

Mahila Samakhya (MS) was set up as a women's education and empowerment programme by the Government of India (GoI) in collaboration with several state governments in 1987. It was set up as a programme for women's education but with a difference where education was not merely literacy but had to be empowering for the women. This definition of education both as a way of learning and as a key to a wider concept of knowledge and understanding is what made this programme different. It opened up the programme contours to a unique design, myriad modes of implementation and newer forms of impact evaluations. As a bureaucrat closely associated with the programme for decades, it is worthwhile to examine what made MS 'different' as a programme and to take a critical look at how these 'differences' worked out in design, implementation and for the sustainability of the programme.

## A different design

Rarely in the public sector does one come across a design of a programme which puts its client group centre stage and allows their needs and demands to determine its core design and execution. Normally, government programmes are designed with specified objectives, targets to achieve and clearly defined beneficiaries. Public funded programmes are inevitably, broad based with multiple components and calculated for the widest possible outreach to achieve maximum public benefit. MS comparatively, was designed as an innovative programme ambitious in its goals. It entered uncharted and untested arenas of rural women's lives and sought to introduce an agenda for education that went beyond literacy but would bring them to a position to interpret information, build knowledge and an understanding of society, economic development and their own subordinated circumstances in a patriarchal order that flourished around them. MS had many of the classic features of a government programme design, in terms of objectives (education for women's empowerment), a clear target group (adult rural women, especially from the weakest sections of society) and clear project implementation structures but 'differences' in the design of the programme became more discernible with a flexible and process-driven operational framework.

There were no laid down targets in terms of numbers or timeframes, for the programme to achieve. Instead, women who joined the programme were to design the contours of the programme and implementation strategies would arise from what these women needed and articulated. The programme's initiatives and strategies would emerge from the women's collective or 'women's *sangha*' of the village which brought upfront their salient issues and that was the lead around which the programme would be planned and implemented. Illustratively, if access to water was the most important issue for women in a set of villages in Banda district of U.P. where water scarcity is chronic or if women's rights' in forests was the key issue for women *sanghas* in Uttarakhand or health issues in some villages of Karnataka, then these would become central to the design of the MS programme in the respective areas.

In order to meet the stated objective of the programme, i.e. education for women's empowerment, the programme had to construct a relevant learning programme around these identified needs. In Banda district of UP, a hand pump repair and water management initiative were undertaken by *sangha* women who learnt to negotiate and deal with staff of the UP Jal Nigam and developed their learning and literacy skills around this issue to be able to handle the technical task of hand pump repairs themselves. Further, to propagate ideas and the experiences of women in this endeavour and to spread awareness on women's rights, the women *sanghas* of Banda came out with a simple broadsheet which was circulated across villages. This also helped to reinforce their literary skills as much as it inspired other women to be able to read and benefit from a women's news sheet.

In Uttarakhand, the agenda of the MS programme adapted itself to the local concerns of women, where knowledge of laws on land, forests and community rights became central to their literacy, education and empowerment processes. Women's *sanghas* of Saharanpur district of U.P. found challenging issues in domestic violence, alcoholism and dowry. The programme here focussed on education and knowledge for gender justice, conflict resolution and in developing an understanding of laws for the protection of women's rights. The interest in the *sanghas* inspired them to set up *nari adalats* themselves, where local and domestic disputes were settled by negotiation amongst families, the community and with the use of free legal aid.

The centrality of women's groups or *sanghas* as drivers of the programme was a very unique feature of the MS design. The variety of issues that emerged as cornerstones for programmatic strategies, seeking to reach the objective of

education for women's empowerment, made the execution of the programme different from state to state and even from district to district. There were no cookie cutter implementation schedules or a clutch of standardised components to be executed. MS project staff had to innovate and tack their skills to each unique situation and help the women sanghas grow in their knowledge, information, learning and understanding of the issues at hand. Education was thus understood not merely as literacy (though that too was important and gradually took root) but the capacity of women to seek and use information, make critical analyses and enhance their abilities and confidence for problem solving and negotiations, so as to better their own lives as also for their community.

Another, key feature in the MS programme design was that primacy given to the 'processes' that led to the realisation of the stated objectives of the programme, rather than to arrive at the goals through a narrow, target-driven approach. This complemented the first key feature of the design-- i.e. the centrality of rural women and to their needs in the evolving strategy of the programme. It correctly understood that for women to come forth for education in adulthood, with the full weight of a patriarchal order stacked against them, their participation in a women's *sangha* was bound to be slow, halting and hesitant. Also correctly surmised was that literacy itself was not that attractive a goal to achieve, vital through it was to sustain empowerment of the women and, therefore, the need and relevance of literacy must first be felt and understood by them. Hence, the strategy to build an education programme around issues that affected women's daily lives, was deliberate and fundamental to the MS programme. This is what made the MS design unique in that programmatic strategies would respond to the educational needs of women in different geographies and contexts with a calculated flexibility and appropriateness, specific to each.

Having adopted such a 'non-negotiable' approach, MS laid emphasis on critical processes which look the women closer to the avowed objectives of the programme. Illustratively, three stages of that process of mobilisation, reflection and collectivisation, deserves special mention. First was the process of reaching out to rural women especially from the weaker sections of society and coalescing them into a group or 'women's *sangha*' and then strengthening the bonds of that *sangha* to reach a point where local and common women's issues were recognised and begun to be articulated and highlighted. The second stage included the facilitation and training that was provided by the MS programme staff to the women, specific to the local issues articulated by them (sometimes more than one

issue would emerge). This was the phase where access to education and information, understanding and knowledge-building, training in developing a gender perspective, were critical to the evolution of the *sanghas* as a cohesive, coherent and thinking entity. The next stage of the process saw the *sanghas* develop new levels of confidence. They charted their own way forward in an action or 'To do' phase. Issue-based networking amongst *sanghas* across the block or district, accessing help from government or NGOs to help build their case, negotiating and dealing with structures of power, became manifest and took them on to find solutions to their problems through their own efforts. The knowledge and education gained over the first two phases, was vital for their sustained confidence in their own abilities and in seeking a more just development for themselves & their community, even if it meant challenging the patriarchal structures or other entrenched power equations around them.

The coming to age of the *sanghas*, saw another stage in their process of evolution and empowerment. The formation of federations where like-minded *sanghas* got together as larger collectives to continue their struggles or vigorously pursue their plans of action for redressal, reform and change for a more gender-just community. Federations could be loosely grouped collectives initially, which came together on what were perceived as common issues of concern but they gradually moved to a more orderly format. Many began registering themselves as local NGOs and set about their business as truly autonomous and self-propelled entities. Andhra Pradesh saw some of the most systematic evolutions of federations of MS women's *sanghas* and was able to make this a reliable strategy for the long-term sustainability of women's *sanghas* and the longevity of MS outcomes without the perpetuation of programmatic structures. The recognition of federations as a valid unit for the sustenance of MS objectives beyond the limited definition of the withdrawal of the programme as an end in itself, actually spelt out a new and higher phase in the process of collectivisation and consolidation of the processes of learning and empowerment.

As there were no targets against which to measure the performance of the MS programme, newer 'process indicators' emerged amongst programme managers and evaluators through which progress of inputs and tracking of outcomes was done. Merely, counting the number of women's *sanghas* formed, was no meaningful measure for the performance of a MS unit but a deep insight into the programme would emerge once the evolution process of the *sanghas* could be traced from the initial stages of their formation, strengthening over time, to their

vibrancy in dealing with education and women's struggles, their successes and failures. New and important process-based yardsticks emerged. New concurrent and annual assessment systems that could capture the change brought about by the programme found place in the annual MS planning and reflection exercises critical to evaluate the trajectory of each MS unit and to fathom the growth of the programme as a whole. This process itself built a methodology of introspection, self-analysis and self-critique within the programme structures, so that correctives and cross learning was readily accepted for further improvements. Primacy was given to process parameters in the monitoring of the Mahila Samakhya programme which, in the early 90's, were not common in most government-funded programmes. Processes and their outcomes, parameters to track levels of empowerment amongst rural women were among the strong and lasting contributions of MS to programme designing in India. It encouraged internal discipline to constantly improve but also contributed to a set of indicators useful for external and independent evaluations of MS.

### Difference in implementation methods

Implementation of the MS programme also revealed innovative arrangements and practices. A public funded programme, MS was given the space to be truly decentralised in execution as the very construction of the programme was centred around the felt needs of rural women. Programmatic inputs were tailored to local requirements and the programme's support structures had to be locally grounded. By design and implementation, its *raison d'être*, was to mobilise rural women and bring to them the advantages of education in order to sustain their empowerment. By ensuring access to knowledge and information, they might make informed choices. Also, in the process, it would instil in them self-confidence to assert their rights in the contexts of family, community and in the world of economic development. Motivators, identified from amongst the village women called a *sakhi* ( village mobiliser )) and a *sahayogini* (a cluster in-charge for six to ten villages) were trained and become linchpins for the mobilisation of poor village women, often from amongst the poorest of the poor societal groups and gradually helped coalesce them into a women's collective or sangha.

These women were selected from the same village based on better educated status and personality, at first as mobilisers, then as facilitators and responders to the women's demands for sets of information, to sustain their literacy skills, to connect with other levels of the programme and for networking with support institutions beyond the confines of the village. Gradually, the role of the

motivator faded as *sangha* women became more assertive and confident. The *sanghas*, once strong and confident, called the shots and *sakhis/sahyoginis* were gradually withdrawn from the villages, by the programme.

The block/district and state-level structures of MS too were principally in the role of facilitators and responders to assist and develop the demands and the directions set by the local *sanghas*. At this level of programme structure, their role was to ensure the necessary funding, draw up norms for smooth functioning of newer components and to garner other material or academic resources for meeting the requirements of the programme. They also helped bring in linkages with both government programmes and non-governmental networks and to carefully maintain the programmatic climate to further the agendas defined by the village women *sanghas*. Such decentralisation in the implementation of any government-funded programme was indeed unique and was possible only because the design and implementation strategies as well as MS administrative structures were in sync with each other.

For instance, the Banda MS unit and the state project office of UP facilitated the women's *sanghas* to develop linkages with the U.P. Jal Nigam for the training of women to repair and maintain community hand pumps in their villages, as the *sanghas* wanted to take this task in their own hands so as to keep access to potable water free from dependence on errant mechanics who were stationed far away from their villages. Staying with the same example, the MS district and state units of UP helped the *sanghas* to forge linkages with an NGO dedicatedly working on rural women's literacy, such as Nirantar, to be able to take forward the *sanghas'* literacy skills and to help these nascent *sangha* women spread their story and ideas amongst other women's *sanghas*, through the publication of a news sheet. Such linkages helped strengthen the local and reinforce the educational inputs of the programme through external networks facilitated by state and district units.

The MS units in Bihar helped village *sanghas* who wanted to set up learning centres for young children (including girls, whom *sangha* women were most keen to bring into the fold of regular education) by setting up *Jagjagi* centres managed and run by local *sangha* women. Similar initiatives emerged in Andhra Pradesh as Bal Kendras as also in Gujarat MS districts. Women *sanghas* in Bihar were very actively interested in the proper functioning of government schools and often made it their business to keep an eye on school routines, distribution of free textbooks to children, mid-day meal preparation/distribution, as well as to picket

teachers who chronically turned up late. The response of the state to this grassroots activism was encouraging of such community spiritedness.

MS as a programme enjoyed the best of both worlds, in its' management and operational style. It was a hybrid style incorporating some financial and administrative qualities of government management systems and the flexibilities of adaptation to required situations which mark non-governmental organisations. It had the advantages of being a central sector government programme with a regular budget and enjoyed the weight of government authority and its support systems from the local district administration right up to the union level. At the same time, it was permitted to have flexibility in administrative decision-making as an autonomous society set up in each of the states implementing it.

There was autonomy in recruitment from the open market to attract the best-suited talent for the job and management methods were allowed to be responsive and adaptable to ground situations, much akin to the styles of grassroots NGOs. MS was allowed to network with and to engage with the best suitable talent outside and within the government system, to further its objective of supporting decentralised capacity-building of rural women. Women development experts, gender trainers or specialists' infields like literacy and education, health and life skills were engaged by the programme from its very initial stages and continued to diversify to meet the wide ranging and highly decentralised demands for training and programme evaluation.

In implementation, MS in its very design had the flexibility to innovate with a variety of strategies. The programme drew heavily on the support of the government schooling system, literacy programmes as also other women's development programmes. While it benefitted from established experiences of the government and also drew upon the successes in the non-governmental sector to develop its strategies and interventions, the programme also adapted and modified some of these to suit its own context. To handle the variety of demands that got thrown up from women's *sanghas* for newer sets of information, the programme managers networked with government departments and non-government organisations to cater to this hunger for information. MS was therefore, constantly evolving and innovating with networks and other available resources whilst also encouraging village *sanghas* to meet their educational needs and knowledge requirements through direct access to suitable organisations.

The programme also evolved its own sets of interventions for providing educational inputs directly to rural women and girls and in methodologies for the formation of collectives and their consolidation. These strategies often changed and transformed over time, as some outlived their value and others had to be put in place to meet newer requirements. In many villages for instance, older *sanghas* found that the younger girls and adolescents in the village needed to be brought into the fold of educational and gender learning inputs much earlier, so that their lives could be benefited at a much younger age. Yet, the old methodologies of the programme would not do for the younger generation. The strategy for setting up Kishori Sanghas in the same village as complementary to the older women sanghas, emerged directly from this felt need. Along with this also came varied strategies for providing educational inputs in a manner that served the younger adult women and adolescent girls in a more comprehensive manner, more of which will be discussed later in this article.

Getting access to government programmes for social or economic development for women was central to most *sangha* activities. *Sangha* women, as they grew in stature and confidence, reached out to local leadership positions in which *gram panchayat* politics was their first port of call and several *sangha* women went on to become elected *panchayat* members (in Karnataka, in particular) and played important roles in bringing women's issues into local governance and development agendas. MS *sanghas* in AP and Karnataka were some of the first to benefit from microcredit initiatives and several *sangha* women were self-selected for roles as ASHA workers in the NRHM or as anganwadi workers in the ICDS.

Though gender training in the MS programme, whether for *sangha* women or programme functionaries, was initially sourced from NGOs and women's development groups, over time, MS staff and the village level *sakhis* and *sahayoginis*, themselves evolved into outstanding gender trainers. Many MS project staff changed roles and shifted from the roles of motivators and mobilisers to gender trainers and block/ district resource persons, within the programme. This was a great strength of the programme, as it helped women within the programme to grow and take on different productive roles, effectively building upon their field experience to become equally significant trainers and resources to the programme. Being a national programme, this allowed travel and dissemination of ideas, strategies and cross learning to other states.



Special mention needs to be made here of the very valuable contribution of the MS experience to the curriculum and teaching learning methodologies of classrooms where more and more girls were participating in education. The Mahila Shikshan Kendras were initiated by the programme as learning centres for women and adolescent girls in most districts. They ran education programmes for illiterate women and developed a distinctive gender-sensitive pedagogy to help adult women learn with speed by weaving the realities of their life and experiences. MSK's ran year-long residential or six-monthly day programmes, depending on the local profile and requirements of women. Equally distinctive was that women and adolescent girls developed relevant literacy skills while also picking up empowering life skills, a sound gender perspective and exhibited a confidence and self-assurance which made them women of substance. MS went on to support varieties of learning centres in many districts, based on the demands of local *sanghas*, who managed them but the accelerated learning pedagogies and a gender perspective were the unique contributions of the programme to classroom methodologies.

The experience of the MSK's went a long way in helping the government evolve programmes for girls' education like the Kasturba Gandhi Ballika Vidyalayas (KGBVs) and the National Programme for the Education of Girls at the Elementary Level (NPEGEL). While the latter sought to mainstream the 'learning plus' strategies of MSK centres into all elementary school classrooms, the KGBV's were girls' only, residential, upper primary schools for dropouts, never enrolled girls in the educationally backward blocks of the country. The KGBVs explicitly chose to provide these girls with an empowering educational experience so they could be catalysts for social change in disadvantaged and remote areas of the country. Interestingly, if MS presence was available in the same block where the KGBV was to be set up, state DoEs invariably hand over this responsibility to the local MS unit. This fitted the MS agenda and *sanghas* did a true and honest selection of eligible girls for the KGBV and administered it with the help of MS inputs. KGBV girls from MS-run residential schools were indeed spirited and confident with elements of a truly empowering education and gender-positive perspectives.

Education, in MS parlance, was not merely literacy, schooling and certification but also about understanding, critical analysis and application to life situations. Literacy and certification were necessary for sustaining knowledge and growth and village *sanghas* were unanimous in this realisation. Thus, invariably one of

the first felt needs articulated by a *sangha* was for formal education. While adapted learning methodologies were evolved in MS to factor in their time availability and to first meet regularly to comprehend the issue and then to raise their learning capacities, *sanghas* were also most keen to educate their daughters as they perceived education to be empowering and necessary for self-development. Designs of MSKs, adult learning centres and the pace of the curriculum for adult women, especially the younger ones, emerged out of *sangha* – programme structure interactions. *Sanghas* were further willing to exert constant pressure on the local schools to include and retain their children particularly girls. Anecdotal documentation in MS constantly revealed the strong and determined family battles that *sangha* women fought to keep their daughters in schools.

Where local education institutions were not available, the *sanghas* readily set up learning centres with the MS programmes' help so as to cater to the local educational needs of young children. Their role in motivating parents and guardians to send their wards, particularly girls, to school regularly and pointing out to the merits of education, have actually found place in many training manuals for village education committees or school management committees vested with the responsibility of playing similar roles in enrolment drives for girls' education. The central government enabled MS *sangha* women to be co-opted as members of school management committees or village education committees, wherever the MS programme was operational. As *sanghas* grew in strength and confidence, they were prepared to stake out schools and teachers and hold them accountable for teaching their children. They brought a constructive energy to this role to make schools accountable by helping out in school activities and in bringing noticeable changes in the schools with which they were associated. They also assisted women teachers posted far from their homes to settle down and feel safe in the village of their posting.

MSKs and open school systems became popular with women and girls who had no other way to get back into the fold of education having dropped out of schools due to familial or economic reasons. There was also a steadily dawning realisation of the importance of, and therefore a move in MS to help the women and children studying in its' centres to acquire, certification, as this was an important document to get ahead in employment and life in general. MSK learners enrolled in open school systems for this purpose while other informal learning centres began mainstreaming children to local government-established schools.

Increasingly, as more and more schools began to be set up under national programmes like the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, *sangha* strategies changed to sending children to schools and holding them accountable for proper functioning rather than duplicating institutions of learning through MS support.

The advantages of a women's education programme that had a major spin off in ensuring public accountability of the government schooling system with its far-flung schools and teachers, was indeed very high. Such independent and grassroots feedback on the performance of the state education system by another more autonomous but government funded programme was extremely valued by local district administrations as well as by state DoE secretaries. MS feedback helped policy-making in many of the central government's initiatives, as already mentioned, in the blue print for the KGBVs, NPEGEL, gender training of DoE staff and teachers as well as village and panchayat level interventions for the promotion of education.

In no small measure, the central and state governments were also the champions of MS. Apart from consciously providing a deliberate space for such a uniquely different programme, they sustained this sensitivity over decades of programme implementation. As the programme grew over the years, governments discovered a treasure trove of the finest gender resource persons within it. Equally significantly, a new set of community mobilisation strategies which were sustainable and time tested, were recognised. The programme had emerged as a very important resource on gender and community mobilisation. Naturally one of the first to draw upon this rich resource were the union and state education departments and local district administrations. MS sanghas and programme functionaries became key resource persons for gender training and community mobilisation inputs in training institutions. In states where MS programmes were in existence, MS inputs were brought into structured activities such as the making of gender-positive textbooks, gender modules for teacher training, gender training of educational administrators, training village education committees or village panchayats in community mobilisation strategies, gender perspectives and in the importance of girl child education. Gradually other arms of the government, chief amongst them being Health, Women and Child Development, Rural Development, Agriculture and Forestry Departments, developed linkages with MS as a resource body or reached out directly to the women's *sanghas* as key resource persons, trainers or opinion makers and local leaders.

Many questioned the location of the MS programme in the DoE as they felt it dealt more with women's issues at its core. They missed the point completely. The programme's overt and stated objective was education for women's empowerment. The manner and methodology of attaining an education in the true sense of the word, where it opens up the mind, instils a belief in oneself and imbues a confidence to determine one's destiny, is the larger definition of education. 'Education of the alphabet and education for wisdom' was the nuanced and different understanding in this programme.

Another unique structure in the MS programme implementation was the role of a watchdog body, the National Resource Group (NRG) created at the national level with 20-25 eminent women from different walks of life who were independent and outside the folds of government and shared a dogged commitment to women's education and empowerment. In this context, it is interesting to examine the role of the NRG of MS, which met three to four times a year and zealously guarded the programme's non-negotiables, its intrinsic decentralised implementation and women-centred execution. At the same time, the NRG provided the programme with conceptual clarity and intellectual inputs to facilitate & develop upon the issues thrown up from the grass root by the sangha women.

The presentations by State Project Directors of Mahila Samakhya were the centre piece of any NRG meeting, where keen anticipation about the development and growth of *sanghas*, their linkages with education, particularly the participation of girls in schools and learning centres, their efforts at issue – based networking and the formation of sustainable 'federation of *sanghas*' were debated and discussed with vigour. The NRG invariably provided a rich body of intellectual and experiential learning to steer the MS programme to new and higher levels of performance. The NRG remained the programmes vigilant guardian to safeguard its autonomy and unique features of functioning. If some state governments or district administrations distorted the unique parameters of the programme when its community based approaches were bypassed or when NGOs came in with pre-determined agendas and tried to hijack the women's *sanghas*, the NRG was quick to rap them on the knuckles, with a forceful defence of the methods and approaches intrinsic to the programme.

## Was the MS approach sustainable?

The programme certainly did impact the lives of all women who were touched by it. Evidence through evaluations and impact assessments in the duration of the programme showed clearly that women were "different" and definitely 'empowered' after being part of this programme. Education added new dimensions of learning, understanding and also widened their horizons, added dimensions to their knowledge base, gave them a realisation of the rights of women, a gender perspective of the social and economic milieu around them and, above all, gave them a self-confidence and self-assurance to stand up for themselves. Apart from the direct and personal effect on women's lives, the strength and comfort of a women's collective or *sangha*, did wonders. It was a sounding-- board for new ideas and interpretations to reinforce their positions or viewpoints, helped to strengthen their capacities as negotiators, made collective bargaining possible and was a great confidence booster to organise plans and activities to carry forward their commitments. Gradually, *sanghas* learnt to build coalitions amongst themselves and with other institutions and platforms, to seek change, reform and redressal, on their own terms.

The strength of federating *sanghas* on issue-based bargaining came into being across several states. Collective positions on matters of violence against women were the first to manifest, as they were quick to identify with such issues, as were others like alcoholism and the delivery systems of several govt pro-poor schemes. It was not the agitations mode that was celebrated in MS *sanghas* but more about women's access and control over education, information and resources, so they could counter their vulnerabilities and emerge as equal members of the social order. The respect they started receiving from the local community, including men, was another hallmark of the programme. In fact, the *sanghas* were always conscious of working with the community around them and building supportive networks which invariably included men.

Sangha women's abilities to negotiate and bargain, were greatly honed and moved from being an instinctive survival strategy in the home and the community, to one of near boardroom standards where with information and analysis they would parley for space, benefits and respect, in matters familial or developmental. It helped rural women build larger and wider agendas, beyond local issues and networked with entities beyond their own *sanghas* and set up a mutually reinforcing spiral of learning and experience, which in turn strengthened

the individual and the local to dream bigger and influence wider circles of society. Their strength took them beyond school watch and education of girls, to a wider outlook of livelihood issues, of accessing benefits from government schemes for women, influencing local & district panchayats by entering local electoral politics, influencing local agendas from a women's perspective and taking up direct action projects in education and economic development.

The mobilisation of the poorest of poor women and their development into an active, pulsating women's sangha, made for one of the most inclusive and transformational outcomes in any programme. The largest in numbers and the keenest participants of the women's collective were SC and ST women, no matter in which district or state the MS programme was running. The outreach soon extended itself to minorities. It accessed upper caste women only partially and in a more gradual manner. Given village dynamics, they were hesitant at first, but in time began identifying themselves with the common causes of women, the concomitant values of education, protection of women's rights and participation in economic development opportunities.

Limitations of the MS strategy were also apparent and needed constant imaginative and innovative solutions. Through a programme funded and managed by the government itself, in a centre-state collaborative mode, with a deliberately different design and implementation strategy, not everywhere within government structures was there a clear understanding of the programme's nature. The attitudes amongst officials tasked to oversee the programme at the state/district level were important for the smooth functioning of the MS programme. There were a fairly large number of public servants who understood the unique space and strategy carved out for MS and actively promoted and encouraged the programme, guided its structures in a constructive way and tried to optimise the impact of the programme. These included many state education secretaries who as Chairs of the state MS programmes provided effective leadership for the development of the programme both in terms of expansion and in its depth. There were others who could not quite comprehend the nuanced approach of MS but at the same time did not want to be obstructive towards a government-funded programme and instinctively kept clear of engaging with it too deeply.

Another fairly large group of government officials perceived it as a government programme which could be co-opted to piggyback other government initiatives and used MS as an agency for delivery of other programmes. Targets of these

add-on responsibilities were more important for these officials than the MS objectives and processes and often led to clashes on achievements, monitoring parameters and incompatibility of objectives. A fourth set comprised those who completely failed to comprehend the programme, were extremely nervous of a women's empowerment programme and as a reflex deliberately obstructed and disrupted the programme. Mercifully, this category had the smallest number.

As a result of the vagaries of attitudes in the government management of the programme, the flow and trajectory of MS implementation had to go through many ups and downs. This was very impactful in the formative years of the programme in particular. It was in evidence again as the programme struggled to establish roots in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh in 2004-06. The problems became sharper when funding of the programme began to be routed through the larger basic education programmes of the District Primary Education Programme or the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. However, the resilience of the programme's workers was noteworthy in that they met these challenges with the courage of their convictions and argued for space and autonomy which had been promised in the original design of MS. As decentralisation took root in the implementation of the programme and as the women's *sanghas* emerged in strength, MS developed a self-grown *kawach* or armoured guard that protected it and helped it gather its own momentum and durability at the decentralised levels. The local was protected as *sanghas* moved out of the handholding of MS project staff and structures and began to make autonomous decisions of their own.

It must, however, be recognised that policy makers and government leadership in the long run continued to repose confidence in the MS approach and strategy as is evidenced by many state governments providing additional budgets from state coffers to the MS programme and constantly endeavouring to expand the coverage of MS to other districts and villages.

Perhaps the biggest limitations to the MS approach and a point which was the government's biggest frustration was the slow pace of MS geographical expansion. By 2015-16, after a presence on the ground since the late 80's, MS presence was in 11 States, 126 districts, 662 educationally backward blocks (from a female literacy point of view) and in about 42,398 villages. The programme did witness a major expansion in the early 2000's and proved itself capable of expanding with quality and an unwavering commitment to its fundamental community-based processes. However, the consolidation phase that followed, through necessary and vital to maintain the health and purity of the programme,

got stuck with several dilemmas' chief amongst them being restricted funds and a limited internal capacity to manage scale.

As happens in government-funded programmes, budgets for MS were limited and though additional funds were put in by the centre and states, from time to time, the budget baskets remained more or less static at about Rs. 90 - 120 crores annually. More significantly, budgets were getting squeezed due to the overriding government priority to allocate bulk of the education outlay towards high profile national programmes for elementary and secondary education. Little was left for slower, process-oriented but effective programmes like MS.

Budgetary constraints apart, flaws were beginning to appear in the MS strategies for expansion and outreach. The MS approach had, in any case, not been one of total saturation of all women in a village by the *sanghas* nor the coverage of all villages in a block or district. It sought to create a critical mass of motivated and educated women who could be effective and educated leaders. Definitions for estimating the critical mass were qualitative and continued to be evolved by the programme, thus remaining a matter of judgement amongst the project personnel.

There had been an abiding faith in the programme that active and vibrant *sanghas* would themselves be able to carry out mobilisation of women in neighbouring villages acting as role models and through direct contacts to successfully replicate the formation of village women's *sanghas* in lesser time and with an informed understanding of women's issues. This approach, however had limited results. Some ripple effects did happen and had positive outcomes. However, the stimulus of inputs in 'education' which helped develop a firm and sustained sense of empowerment in the *sanghas* fell short. The absence of the role of MS motivators-cum-trainers in building local capacities and the providing of educational inputs to the nascent *sanghas* for moving forward with intellectual clarity stood out as major gaps. This dependence on programme structures and interventions in the initial stages of *sangha* formation and mobilisation practices was underestimated. The programme did innovate and make efforts towards addressing this aspect by relocating *sakhis* and *sahyoginis* to new villages where there were fledgling *sanghas* that needed to be helped and by providing programme resources nearer at hand at the block level, in order to facilitate the *sangha-to-sangha* mobilisation activities.

The alternate route of setting up new programme structures in uncovered areas, following the grassroots mobilisation processes to bring local women together in



*sanghas* for the purpose of education and empowerment, continued to be adopted but drew heavily on both financial and intellectual programme resources. By 2005-6, the programme again innovated with a new strategy of withdrawal from villages where it had spent more than seven to ten years and to shift its action to newer villages. This was in the hope of setting realistic time frames for programme led interventions for mobilization, sangha formation and strengthening, provision of educational inputs and the development of fairly autonomous and self-propelled *sanghas*, to be completed more efficiently having gathered experience on what works best in different contexts. There was some degree of success with this policy but severing the umbilical cord between *sanghas* and the programme structures, proved to be more resistant than anticipated.

The cumulative and disparate sets of demands for information and inputs from the field, where newer and older *sanghas* had to be back stopped by the programme managers separately and, differently, became a strain on the lean cadres of the programme. Even MS support networks were stretched and MS was in any case choosy about its support systems, as it wanted its non-negotiable processes respected. The bunch of trusted institutions and NGOs who had played a very supporting role in the programme so far were also overstretched and the search for newer ones was not yielding as much as was needed. The crunch was obvious. On the other hand, there were takers for co-opting the readymade *sanghas* in MS, for setting up rural microcredit systems, self-help groups and for achievements of targets for governmental and non-governmental schemes and initiatives.

In addition, the programme was also facing big challenges and dilemmas regarding the type and nature of demands emerging from the *sanghas*, to give an example, economic empowerment opportunities. MS was by design not equipped to deliver on this and its efforts to link the *sanghas* with government benefit programmes or to access projects in agriculture and livelihoods in the NGO sector, were always encouraged. In fact, the classic MS strategy had been to facilitate such linkages and let *sanghas* take a call on firming up the engagement themselves. There was similar orchestration of more intensive and advanced sets of issues on health, land, water and forest management and what it meant for *sangha* women to fully handle them. The spiral of women's quest for knowledge was explosive and had gone beyond the initial scratching of the surface to a deeper and more mature demand for the right answers.

This was clearly a challenge of scale and, programmatically, this was overwhelming and not everyone within its fold had the ability to ride this out. There was anxiety that the programme was being pulled in directions beyond the most liberal understanding of its mandate for 'education' while others felt that by failing to respond to the felt needs of grassroots women, it was tantamount to a betrayal of their trust. The MS policy of providing linkages with and facilitating networks outside the programme to meet the hopes of village *sangha* women, had clearly fallen short.

This is not to say MS was at fault but it did show the limitations of those networks and organisations also in that they failed to appreciate that the spiral of learning of these women had shot to newer heights and that *sanghas* would not be passive recipients of delivery programmes and projects. They would question, provide a critique and scrutinise government and NGO machineries that delivered socio-economic benefits from a position of confidence and practical understanding. What the true success of MS outcomes were - informed educated women who asserted their knowledge and understanding for general good - was also the factor that outstripped the programme's capacity to handle it and find strategies to go to scale.

There was a failure amongst the policy makers and programme managers themselves to shift the programme to a new level of performance and expanded coverage. It was difficult to strike a balance between new management practices which preserved its non-negotiable principles of action and stabilised key and core programme practices for faster implementation and replication. The dilemma to stick to its core tasks and to leave the spin-offs to others was a dichotomy that was difficult to resolve. It was an important factor in prolonging the 'consolidation' phase of MS and, in turn, drove it into a deeply reflective, self-analytical mode. There were no easy answers and some hard-nosed reflections on its future with re-defined timelines was required. Hopefully, this challenge will be surmounted with the energy of the programme to re-invent itself and transfer its sound knowledge-cum-process base to a rejuvenated programme.

MS practices and processes are too important a legacy to be lost in the world of development and social change. One could straight away think of its lasting value for systems where mobilisation and awareness-building amongst rural women is key to the success of any government programme. Equally valuable are the documented strategies in MS for mobilisation techniques along with training materials for building a gender perspective/understanding amongst rural women.

Some of these processes have been mainstreamed in the National Livelihood Mission but this legacy bears relevance for all rural development programmes that seek to undertake community mobilisation, change in behavioural mindsets and provide inclusion to weaker sections of society.

**About the Author:**

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