

Why it is important to retain an independent Mahila Samakhya Programme

A Policy Brief

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1. Background

The Mahila Samakhya (MS) programme, started in 1989 as a national programme for women's empowerment under the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), was a response to the 1986 education policy that recognised education as a means of empowerment and transformation, and also acknowledged women's empowerment as key to social transformation.

MS was first introduced in ten districts in three states: Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and Karnataka. Now, it functions in 11 states¹, working in 126 districts covering about 42,000 villages (as of April 2014). It was initially funded by the Dutch Government and later British government (DfID) and implemented as a centrally sponsored programme in the states except in the case of Bihar where it was a subset of Bihar Education Project funded by UNICEF.

The programme was set up with the understanding that the barriers to women's education are not just access to infrastructural facilities, but also patriarchal family and societal norms. Empowerment of women was considered to be integral and a "critical precondition" for greater educational outcomes for both women and girls. The strategy for doing this was based on enabling women to explore the power of the collective. Women are mobilised and organised into *sanghas* or *samoohs* where they come together, discuss, reflect, organise, and analyse, and articulate their needs and to address them jointly. The *sangha* has been the most critical institution

in building positive self-image, developing critical thinking skills, decision making capabilities, and providing information, knowledge and skills in terms of legal issues, economic empowerment, and governance.

MS began where most others schemes end by starting with women belonging to the most marginalised communities, such as Dalits or *adivasis*. The programme did not lay down any targets but emphasised on the processes. The collectives were empowered to set their own agenda and processes and were informed, supported, enabled by the organisational structure of the MS. Yet, or perhaps because of this approach, MS not only succeeded in creating suitable structures to address various issues such as Nari Adalats, counselling centres, Sanjeevani Kendras, Mahila Shikshan Kendras, etc.. Equally significant is that MS registered tangible gains in areas where other policy responses have either failed or have had only limited success.

The MS programme was conceptualised with the idea that the *sanghas* and the federation (an independent federated body of the *sanghas*) would eventually be self-reliant leading to the withdrawal of the project. While withdrawal process has started in many programme areas through formation of federations, the programme also kept expanding to new blocks. This means that though the programme is old, a good number of MS villages, blocks and districts are in fact new and young, and need nurturing and support.

MS is a low-cost programme with an annual Government of India budget in the range of 60-70 crore rupees. Once the DfID funding got over in the 11th Plan period, the 12th Five Year Plan had approved its funding by

¹ The states are Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarkhand.

the Government of India for three years with an idea that this period could be used to evaluate and consolidate the gains, and inform the future strategy. However, the present government is not yet committed to this decision, and there appears to be a lack of clarity regarding the programme's continuation or future. This note is an attempt to put together the evidence of MS's impact and argue for its continuation in the education department at least for a few more years with an objective of developing a clear exit strategy that helps consolidate the gains and helps the government take an evidence-based policy decision regarding continuation or replication of the model.

2. Impact of Mahila Samakhya

This section puts together the evidence on different outcomes as presented by a number of independent papers, studies and evaluations; Independent in this context means these have not been undertaken by Mahila Samakhya.

a. Intergenerational and Spill over Effects on education, health and early marriage practices

The MS programme has far-reaching consequences for MS women, their children, families and their community, in that the positive outcomes of the programme has spillover effects over the next generation as well as in the wider community. This is true especially when we examine immunization rates and educational outcomes for girls in the community (Janssens, 2004a).

The spillover effects have also been seen in non-participating households within the MS districts. For example, awareness of the educational programmes is higher in non-participating households in MS village. In addition, there is a marked increase in community trust even for non-participating households and villages (Janssens, 2004b; Janssens 2010). Quantitative studies indicate increased parental awareness about school and education. Parents are also more likely to participate and contribute to school activities. The study established a direct relationship between

MS and improved pre-school enrolment (Janssens 2004b).

One of the greatest impacts of MS has been on girls' education. A recently concluded national study by Indian Institute of Management Bangalore (IIMB) covering all MS districts in the country established that education level was higher among women in MS districts; and the age at marriage was also higher for women in MS districts. The MS districts that started with a disadvantage in comparison to non-MS districts to begin with, show that the outcomes related to both education and age at marriage become better within one generation. This means that young women in non-MS districts are missing out on the positive educational outcomes that are characteristic of MS districts. What is even more important is that the effect size is bigger for the most disadvantaged groups – whether one takes the poorest quintile or the SC/ST communities - for both outcomes related to the education and the postponement of age at marriage (Bhuwania, Mukherji & Swaminathan, 2016).

b. Education and Empowerment

Research has indicated that the *sanghas* have enabled individuals exercise their agency and rights, either as a collective, or as individuals in their homes (Bhatla & Rajan, 2003). It has significantly improved their ability to leave home without permission, and their political participation (Kandpal, Baylis & Arends-Kuenning, 2012). Researchers have also established that MS has been able to affect empowerment outcomes, not as a movement from A to B, but as a constantly shifting negotiated process (Batliwala 2007; Ghose & Mullick, 2014; Jandhyala 2003; Chandra, year unknown).

Several studies indicate that MS has been able to reframe educational outcomes to much beyond literacy. It has been able to engage the *sanghas* in contesting power structures that are often defined by the literate. Also, MS has not viewed education as a narrow literacy outcome, and has framed it in the larger discourse of

information and knowledge sharing (Ghose & Mullick, 2014; Jain 2003; Joseph 1991)

c. Social Networks and Community Building, Identity and Social Structure

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses have indicated positive contribution by MS through diversification and consolidation of social networks. MS *sangha* members are able to diversify their social networks and create relationships outside of caste and kinship networks, greatly enhancing their social capital (Kandpal & Baylis, 2013)

MS members have also demonstrated increased trust in community members and strangers. In addition, Janssen (2010) through econometric analysis shows that their contribution to community projects is significantly larger compared to non-MS members. MS villages have also demonstrated the ability to offset community characteristics that inhibit collective action.

Qualitative studies have also indicated that social networks of *sangha* women have vastly improved, and have also facilitated the reorganisation of household relationships. Through the framework of sisterhood, they are able to enhance the capacity building, peer learning and create and build solidarity within *sanghas* as well as other community groups in the villages. (Behar & Aiyar, 2003).

In addition to enhancing general social networks, *sanghas* have enabled mechanisms that allow for the ownership, control and validation of community decisions. These community relationships have been able to cut across traditional caste and kinship ties (Bhatla & Rajan, 2003). MS has been able to influence caste relationships and caste identity at the local levels; *sanghas* are often integrated, breaking caste structures, one of the rare institutions to be so (Jandhyala, 2003; Mangla 2012). MS has also been able to affect familial power dynamics. Qualitative evidence indicates a slow, tentative and constantly negotiated process wherein family dynamics are shifting, creating spaces of autonomy and action within the household (Jandhyala 2003).

d. Strengthening Democracy, Political Participation and Governance

Available evidence also suggests that MS has been instrumental in transforming the political culture of MS villages. It has enabled women to exercise power in public spaces, either through participation in the Panchayat system or in school management committees. Additionally, the *sanghas* have also created spaces for political accountability from their local governing bodies (Batiwala, 1996; Behar & Aiyar, 2003; Jain 2003; Jandhyala, 2003). Reservation and quotas have ensured access to governance structures but MS has enabled effective use of that access disallowing the widely prevalent practice of male-capture in most other places.

The *sanghas* have been able to create organisational structures that have allowed them to resist the bureaucratic and 'scheme'-based processes of education. The *sanghas* are also able to move beyond the systemic rules and hierarchies, and have provided a base for creating consensus in the villages based on democratic principles. They have been able to promote a culture of questioning, critical thinking, collective decision-making and mobilisation on public issues all of which are extremely necessary for strengthening democratic structures at the local levels (Bhatla & Rajan, 2003; Chandra, unknown; Mangla 2013; Jandhyala, 2003).

There has been a clear emergence of leadership from the most marginalised of communities. The women in the *sanghas*, by employing self-reflection practices, have enabled changes in self-perception leading to behavioural outcomes such as greater physical mobility for the women in the *sanghas* (Das & Agarwal, 2004; Ghose & Mullick, 2014; Joseph, 1991).

e. Livelihood and Access to Financial Resources

There are clear indicators based on quantitative analyses that MS *sanghas* have enabled a rise in the percentage of women working outside the home or running small businesses (Ghose & Mullick, 2014, Bhatla & Rajan, 2003). Qualitative evidence also

indicates that *sanghas* have helped create pathways for non-traditional professions such as masonry, carpentry etc. In addition, they have built on women's experiences and knowledge to create new agricultural products, use common property resources to produce goods, and use seed banks for farmers (Jandhyala 2003).

f. Violence and concepts of Justice

One of the most significant impacts of the MS programme has been to redefine the concept of justice in the rural areas. There has been a tremendous impact of MS-enabled, women-initiated community response to gender violence. Community-based arbitration forums such as the Nari Adalats have helped reduce instances of violence in the rural areas. In addition, these informal justice mechanisms have enabled a significant change in women's self-image even when complete resolution of the matter was not possible (Bhatla & Rajan, 2003; Ghose & Mullick, 2014; Jain 2003; Martin, 2014)

g. Potential to transform

One study based on a quantitative analysis indicated that an increase of 20% to 30% empowerment outcomes can be predicted in non-intervention areas if MS is introduced (Kandpal, Baylis & Arends-Kuenning, 2012). This implies that if MS is introduced in non-intervention districts, we can expect a definitive increase in empowerment outcomes such as women's employment outside the home, their political participation as well as their autonomy in terms of their mobility.

h. Policy Impact

MS has had two clear policy uptakes: One is the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV), a national scheme for residential schooling of girls at upper primary stage from most marginalised communities and contexts, which is modelled on Mahila Shikshan Kendra (MSK) of the MS. The second is the Nari Adalat, i.e., women's court that has been institutionalised in a number of states including Gujarat and which has helped in reducing the number of

court cases tremendously by resolving family disputes locally.

3. Policy Choices and Lessons

The national evaluation done by IIMA in 2013 reinforced that MS has made a positive impact on awareness and action in the areas of: (a) Violence against women, (b) Legal awareness, (c) Education of women and adolescents, (d) Health and (e) Political participation. This report also estimated that on an average, a *sangha* member forgoes wage income of at least Rs. 3,532 per annum to order to contribute to the *sangha*. If this is estimated over the entire programme, it amounts to about Rs. 170 crore; this is at par with the allocation of about Rs. 210 crore in the XIth Plan (2007-2012). Given the fact that the impact of the programme far outweighs the costs of the programme, it makes every sense to retain and nurture it rather than closing it or merging it with another programme with a very different focus, as this is tantamount to closure.

The rationale for suggesting that the programme should be continued, and continued in Education rests on the following arguments:

i. Poor gender equality status

The recently released Human Development Report shows that the neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Pakistan that rank lower than India on the overall Human Development Index (HDI) have performed much better when it comes to achieving gender equality. In the entire South Asia, only war-torn Afghanistan has a worse ranking than India in the Gender Inequality Index (GII). It is clear that it is gender inequality that pulls India's ranking down in Human Development Index. MS with its proven record on accelerating the pace towards attaining greater equality outcomes provides an obvious proven policy option.

ii. Programme still young in many areas

The MS grew at a slow pace and the programme is still young in many places.

Originally, it was conceptualised that it would require about ten years for these processes to take roots and show results, after which the federating process should be started. Here, the MS areas can be divided into three kinds: (a) the blocks and districts that are new must be given that opportunity considering the clear evidence of the impact, (b) those that have completed ten years and still not federated should be studied to understand the reasons for the same and then be given support for moving towards becoming independent, and (iii) those districts / blocks that have federated should be encouraged to be independent with some capacity building support for a short period.

iii. Merger with National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) is untenable

There are indications that the Union Government is planning to move the MS programme from the Department of School Education and Literacy in Ministry of Human Development Resources to the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) operational under the Ministry of Rural Development. Unlike microfinance groups or self-help groups formed in schemes such as the NRLM, MS is able to look at a wide variety of individual and community needs, ranging from education to health or gender violence. The flexibility to form and articulate the agenda of the *sangha* is one of the strongest elements in the MS and any programmatic change will kill this very flexibility that has given the MS a different character and is at the root of its visible impact. The ground level functionary in the NRLM works in one place just for three months to mobilise women for forming a group and unlike MS functionary does not continuously work with women on their capacity building and empowerment on a long term basis.

4. Recommendations

a. For the Union Government

Taking all the evidence of MS' impact and other facts into consideration, the best option before the Union Government is: (i) to provide financial and administrative

support for the originally sanctioned years by the 12th Five Year Plan (up till March 2018), (ii) to use the intervening period to further examine the evidence of impact of the programme, and (iii) to draw an expansion or exit plan based on the above. Overall, it is important to work on an expansion or exit strategy rather than closing it abruptly, if at all.

It is important to add that MS costs less than even half a percent of a programme like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) while it contributes significantly towards the attainment of SSA goals such as removal of gender disparity in education and universal primary education, not to mention numerous other gains in health, political and economic empowerment of women. It is possible that the thought of merger occurred because of its small financial size but in this case, the size is not an indicator of the programme's impact and potentials.

b. For the State Governments

Given that states now have more untied funds in their hands following the post 14th Financial Commission recommendations, it is also now time for them to decide their own priorities. The annual MS expenditure is in the range of 5-10 crores in different states, and all states are in a position to fund this on their own. For instance, the Committee of Secretaries set up by the Government of Kerala to work out the future of MS-Kerala has approved funding to the MS scheme, with the same budget as the last MHRD budget. The commitment is for a period of three years, starting April 2016. The funding will be through the Education Department, where there is already a budget head for MS. The MS society will continue to run the programme with full autonomy as before.

What is important is to understand that the Government of Kerala has recognised MS as an effective mechanism for addressing the issues of extremely vulnerable women such as Adivasi women, and accordingly prioritising its continuation and expansion. Other states with much worse gender related indicators than Kerala perhaps need to follow suit.

Acknowledgements

The Centre for Budget and Policy Studies (CBPS), Bangalore is presently conducting an evaluation of Mahila Samakhya in Karnataka and Bihar, with funding support from International Development Research Council. As part of our research, we conducted a review of all available evidence on MS's impact. In this process, we had also appealed to a large number of academics, researchers, professionals and practitioners to share any work that they could have come across or conducted, and that was not available in public domain. The response was overwhelming and we acknowledge this contribution. CBPS in collaboration with the Education Resource Unit (ERU) also held a half-day workshop titled "Mahila Samakhya's Impact on Social and Economic Change: Building on the Evidence" on 16th of January, 2016 in New Delhi. At this workshop, IIMA and IIMB, ERU and CBPS presented the research studies showing the positive impact of Mahila Samakhya on various social outcomes. This policy brief is an outcome of the review as well as the deliberations held in the Delhi workshop. It is not possible to mention all the names but we thankfully acknowledge all the contributions.

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