

# Why It Is Important to Retain an Independent Mahila Samakhya Programme

JYOTSNA JHA, NIVEDITHA MENON

The Mahila Samakhya Programme that began in 1989 has made significant contributions to women's empowerment in a little over 25 years. Yet, the government seems unsure about Mahila Samakhya. This article evaluates the programme's successes and argues against scrapping it summarily or merging it with other programmes.

We thank all academics, researchers and other professionals who shared their work with the Centre for Budget and Policy Studies in the organisation's endeavour to evaluate Mahila Samakhya in Karnataka and Bihar. CBPS in collaboration with the Educational Resource Unit also held a half-day workshop titled "Mahila Samakhya's Impact on Social and Economic Change: Building on the Evidence" on 16 January 2016 in New Delhi. At this workshop, Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad and Indian Institute of Management Bangalore, ERU and CBPS presented research studies. This piece 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 thank all the contributors.

Jyotsna Jha ([jyotsna@cbps.in](mailto: jyotsna@cbps.in)) and Niveditha Menon are with the Centre for Budget and Policy Studies, Bengaluru.

The Mahila Samakhya Programme, started in 1989 as a national programme for women's empowerment under the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), was a response to a 1986 policy that recognised education as a means of women's empowerment. It envisaged women's empowerment as a key to social transformation. The programme was first introduced in 10 districts in Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and Karnataka. As of April 2014, it functions in 11 states,<sup>1</sup> working in 126 districts covering about 42,000 villages. It was initially funded by the Dutch government and later by the British government's Department for International Development (DFID) and implemented as a centrally-sponsored programme in states, except in Bihar where it was a subset of Bihar Education Project funded by UNICEF.

Mahila Samakhya is a low-cost programme with an annual Government of India budget in the range of Rs 60–Rs 70 crore. Once the DFID funding got over in the Eleventh Plan period, the Twelfth Five Year Plan approved its funding by the Government of India for three years with an idea that this period could be used to evaluate and consolidate the gains, and inform future strategy. However, the present government is not committed to this decision, and it seems to lack clarity regarding the programme's future. This article is an attempt to put together the evidence of the programme's impact and argue for its continuation in the education department for at least a few more years with an objective of developing a clear exit strategy that helps consolidate the gains.

## The Power of the Collective

The programme started with women belonging to the most marginalised communities, such as Dalits or Adivasis. It did not lay down targets but emphasised

on processes. The collectives were empowered to set out their own agenda and initiate processes. Mahila Samakhya succeeded in creating suitable structures to issues pertaining to Nari Adalats, counselling centres, Sanjeevani Kendras and Mahila Shikshan Kendras. It also registered tangible gains in areas where other policy responses had either failed or had limited success.

One of the ways in which education of women was sought to be linked with their empowerment was enabling them to explore the power of the collective. *Sanghas* or *samoohs*, where women come together, discuss, reflect, organise, analyse, and articulate their needs, was seen as a key agency for the purpose. Mahila Samakhya made *sangha* the most critical agency in building positive self-image of women, developing their critical skills and decision-making capabilities, and providing information, knowledge and skills in legal, economic, and governance matters.

The 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. The withdrawal process has started in many programme areas through formation of federations. At the same time, the programme is expanding to new blocks. This means that the programme is young in a good number of blocks and districts and needs nurturing and support.

Research has indicated that the sanghas have enabled women exercise their agency and rights, either as parts of a collective, or as individuals in their homes (Bhatla and Rajan 2003). It has significantly improved their ability to leave home without permission, and increased their political participation (Kandpal et al 2012). Several studies indicate that the programme has been able to reframe educational outcomes to much beyond literacy. Sanghas have been empowered to contest power structures that are often defined by the literate. More importantly, Mahila Samakhya has not viewed education just in terms of literacy, but has framed it in the larger discourse of information and knowledge

sharing (Ghose and Mullick 2014; Jain 2003; Joseph 1991).

Mahila Samakhya's positive outcomes have spilled over to the next generation. This is especially true when we examine immunisation rates and educational outcomes for girls in the community (Janssens 2004). The spillover effects have also been seen in non-participating households in the districts involved in the programme. For example, in these areas people—even if they do not participate directly in the programme—have a high level of awareness about educational programmes. In addition, there is a marked increase in community trust even for non-participating households and villages (Janssens et al 2004; Janssens 2010). Studies indicate increased parental awareness about school and education. Parents are also more likely to participate and contribute to school activities. One study (Janssens et al 2004) established a direct relationship between the programme and improved pre-school enrolment.

A recent nationwide study by the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore covering all the districts under the programme found that educational level was higher among women in such districts. Women also married later in these districts. The districts under the programme that started with a disadvantage compared those not under Mahila Samakhya showed marked improvement in a span of just one generation. This means that young women in districts not under the programme are missing out on Mahila Samakhya's positive educational outcomes. 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 Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe communities—for outcomes related to the education and the postponement of marriage (Bhuwania et al 2016).

### **Social Networks and Community Building**

Sangha members are able to diversify their social networks and create relationships outside of caste and kinship networks, greatly enhancing their social capital (Kandpal and Baylis 2013).

Janssen's (2010) econometric analysis shows that Mahila Samakhya members' contribution to community projects is significantly larger compared to non-members. Studies have also indicated that social networks of sangha women have vastly improved, and facilitated the reorganisation of household relationships. The framework of sisterhood enhances capacity building, fosters peer learning and creates solidarity within sanghas as well as other community groups in the villages (Behar and Aiyar 2003).

Sanghas have enabled mechanisms that allow for the ownership, control and validation of community decisions. Such community relationships have been able to cut across traditional caste and kinship ties (Bhatla and Rajan 2003). The programme has also been able to affect power dynamics in the family. 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).

### **Governance, Livelihoods and Justice**

Mahila Samakhya has enabled women to exercise power in public spaces, either through participation in the panchayat system or in school management

committees. The sanghas have also created spaces for political accountability in local governing bodies (Batliwala 1996; Behar and Aiyar 2003; Jain 2003; Jandhyala 2003). Reservation and quotas have ensured access to governance structures but Mahila Samakhya has enabled effective use of that access and in so doing, they have checked the capture of spaces and agencies by males.

There are clear indicators based on quantitative analyses that sanghas have enabled a rise in the percentage of women working outside homes or running small businesses (Ghose and Mullick 2014; Bhatla and Rajan 2003). Qualitative evidence also indicates that sanghas have helped create pathways for non-traditional professions such as masonry and carpentry. The collectives 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).

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 a dispute has not been possible (Bhatla and Rajan 2003;

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Ghose and Mullick 2014; Jain 2003; Martin 2014).

A 2013 nationwide evaluation of Mahila Samakhyas by Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad estimated that on an average, a sangha member forgoes at least Rs 3,532 per annum in wages in order to contribute to the sangha. If this estimate is extrapolated to the entire programme, the contribution of the sangha members is about Rs 170 crore—this is almost at par with the 210 crore allocated to the programme by the Eleventh Plan (2007–12). Given the fact that the impact of the programme far outweighs its costs, it makes every sense to retain and nurture it rather than closing it or merging it with another programme that has a very different focus.

### Untenable Merger

There are indications that the union government is planning to move the programme from the Department of School Education and Literacy in Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) to the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) under the Ministry of Rural Development. Unlike microfinance groups or self-help groups formed in schemes such as the NRLM, Mahila Samakhyas looks at a 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 Mahila Samakhyas's strong points and any programmatic change will kill this flexibility. The ground level functionary in the NRLM works in one place just for three months to mobilise women for forming a group and unlike a Mahila Samakhyas functionary does not continuously work with women to build their capacities and empower them on a long-term basis.

Taking all the evidence of Mahila Samakhyas's impact into consideration, the best option before the centre is: (i) to provide financial and administrative support for the term originally sanctioned by the Twelfth Five Year Plan till March 2018, (ii) to use the intervening period to examine the programme's impact, and (iii) to draw an expansion or exit plan based on the above. It is important to work on an expansion or exit strategy rather than closing the programme

abruptly, if at all. It is important to add that Mahila Samakhyas 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.

Given that states now have more untied funds in their hands following the Fourteenth Financial Commission recommendations, it is also now time for them to decide their own priorities. The annual Mahila Samakhyas expenditure is in the range of Rs 5–10 crore in different states, and all states are in a position to fund the programme. For instance, the Committee of Secretaries set up by the Government of Kerala to work out the future of the programme's future in the state has approved funding with the same budget as that drawn up by the MHRD. What is also important is that the Government of Kerala has recognised Mahila Samakhyas as an effective mechanism for addressing the issues of extremely vulnerable women such as Adivasi women. The Uttar Pradesh has also agreed to support Mahila Samakhyas in the state using the programme's current structure as an autonomous body under the Department of Basic Education. Other states need to follow suit.

#### NOTE

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

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