

Empowering Education: the Mahila Samakhya experience

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The Mahila Samakhya experience over the past twelve years offers a unique case of trying to explore and understand the issues of women's education and empowerment and the inter linkages thereof in different regional and rural contexts within India. It offers an example of the importance of empowerment of women as a critical precondition to facilitate greater inclusion of women and their daughters into education. Further, it provides an alternative paradigm to women's mobilisation and empowerment to the current and dominant focus on economic interventions as the principal strategy for women's empowerment. The uniqueness of the MS strategy was pithily captured in the Programme Appraisal Report of 1989. "There is no programme comparable to the Education for Women's Equality programme in terms of the scale and mix of activities, in terms of organisational location and form, or in terms of the long term ambition to grow into a major vehicle for women's empowerment throughout India." Has this euphoric expectation been met? Successive evaluations have generally concurred with this early expectation with some limitations. The organisational form and diversity of activities has been an effective vehicle for women's empowerment and education in the areas where the programme is being implemented. However, it has a long way to go to have an impact across the country.

Mahila Samakhya started as a pilot project in 10 districts in the States of UP, Gujarat and Karnataka during 1988-89 and has grown into a programme of scale and is currently being implemented in 60 backward districts in the country covering over 9000 villages in 10 states.¹ It is estimated that over two lakh women are actively mobilised and organised by the programme with a much larger number being impacted indirectly.

While education of women and girls have been central to national discourse in India for over a century, and a whole set of enabling interventions designed in the form of special courses, separate schools and so on, it was only in the 1980s that the roots of continued gender disparities not only in education but in society at large came to be debated and addressed. The 70's and 80's are significant watersheds for women in India. The growing women's movement raised fundamental questions of the ineffectiveness of development initiatives since independence for women. The interrogation and engagement with State policies resulted in remarkable outcomes in the form of legislative provisions to protect the rights of women, the laws on dowry, rape, domestic violence, setting up of protection cells, reservations in panchayat bodies, reservations in the allocation of funds for women in development projects. The list could go on. These progressive legislative guarantees notwithstanding, and despite the increased focus on women in development initiatives, the problem of women's marginalisation and disempowerment remain deeply problematic.ⁱⁱ

It is within this backdrop that the Mahila Samakhya programme (hereafter referred to as MS) began to take shapeⁱⁱⁱ. The genesis of MS can be traced to the National Policy on Education, 1986, a landmark in the field of policy on women's education in India. The section on Education for Women's Equality (Ch.XII, p.105-107) focuses on

empowerment of women as the critical precondition for their participation in the education process. For the first time official policy recognised the persistent gender imbalances in education and the continued marginalisation of women and girls. It privileged the radical role of education in redressing such imbalances and in empowering women. It recognised the need to move away from mere provision or improvement of educational infrastructure alone. This sensitivity of the policy to persistent gender inequality resulted from a long consultative process in which the role and participation of women active in the women's movement was critical. The policy commitment that "education will be used as an agent of basic change in the status of women"^{iv} was translated into a programme strategy through the conjunctures of ideas shared by people differently located, bureaucrats, activists, feminists and development workers. This interaction proved dynamic as the experiences from the field provided insights on why education has so far been beyond the reach of rural poor women in particular. The situation with respect to education is a reflection of women's status in society. Their subordinate status and lack of control on any aspect of their lives; educational structures insensitive and inadequate to meet women's needs; isolated and caught up in the struggles for survival women have such a low self esteem and image that incapacitates them to such an extent that they are unable to make any demands of the system.

Given the complex and deep rooted barriers to women's access to education, it was argued that it is only when women's agency is developed to address these barriers themselves and they are empowered that the ground would be set for their participation in the education process. That the responsibility of designing and framing such a programme was given to two women with a vast experience of gender issues in India and who were closely associated with the women's movement is an indication of the degree to which women's groups were able to influence a government intervention for women's education and empowerment.^v

The challenges in designing such a programme were many. Firstly the redefinition of education as an enabling and empowering tool, as a process that would enable women to "think critically, to question, to analyse their own condition, to demand and acquire the information and skills they need to enable them to plan and act collectively for change." Education, it was agreed, must therefore help women to question rather than accept, enable them to affirm their own potential and sustaining processes that would enable women to move from situations of passive acceptance of their situation to assertion and collective action, in short to take control of their lives; and building conscious and independent collectives of women (sanghas) which would initiate and sustain social change processes^{vi}

This ambitious project also necessitated designing project management structures and systems that would provide flexibility and freedom for contextual initiatives to evolve. By locating the MS programme in the Department of Education and not in the Women's Development or Rural Development Ministries, the issue of women's development and empowerment was brought in much more squarely within the ambit of a broad definition of an empowering education, thereby making a subtle shift in locating the problems of women's marginalisation in areas other than the provision of special services/creation of

access to credit/economic development or skill training. A critical difference was the MS emphasis on a transformatory empowerment agenda as central to women's education.

The programme design consciously moved away from conventional development approaches and is different in that no pre-determined targets were set, no services were to be delivered, the focus was to be on enabling women to identify their priorities and issues around which the programme enables a learning process and plans its strategies and interventions. The principal strategy is to mobilise and organise women into collectives (called sanghas), which are the fora for reflection and mutual solidarities to evolve.

The focus on collectives was in itself a conscious decision and a departure from the usual focus in most development and poverty alleviation initiatives on the individual as a beneficiary. Given the fact that MS was seeking to conscientise and enable women to examine the roots of their marginalisation and try to pull those roots out, this daunting task it was felt could only be attempted through group solidarity and support. This was especially so in the case of the target group the programme was focusing on, poor rural women, the most marginalised and with the least voice. The lessons from the women's movement in highlighting the need and criticality of group solidarity in arriving at this strategy cannot be understated. Today, of course the significance of groups and collectives has been recognised as an effective strategy for reaching varied social/community groups and hence forms the basis of most development initiatives.

Through successive plan periods, MS has not deviated from these basic objectives that have been articulated in a set of non-negotiables that are to be accepted by any new state to which the programme is extended.^{vii} Essentially they state that the pace of women's mobilisation shall not be hurried, women's concerns and problems as articulated by them will be the starting points for the programme, and project personnel will play a facilitative than a directive role. Given the radical nature of the approach, it was clear that such a programme cannot be implemented through the normal governmental departments but would require a structure that would allow for women from outside government to be part of the implementation process. Autonomous project societies, therefore, have been set up at individual State levels. Further efforts are made to find women committed to the cause of women's empowerment and with experience of having worked with poor women to steer the programme at different levels. This enabled capturing the "worm's eye view and not a bird's eye view" of situations of poor women.^{viii} Grassroots level workers are in almost all cases poor women themselves from within the communities the programme works in and hence bring a radical edge to the interventions.

As the programme does not specify any one-entry strategy nor is there a set agenda, the programme personnel are continuously challenged to translate the programme objectives into workable strategies on the ground. This has meant that the programme have a cadre of workers with an in-depth understanding of gender issues, the empowerment process, information at hand and the ability to respond sensitively to the needs of the sanghas. Recognising that there are varied demands, MS has built in recursive training and capacity building programme for the personnel at the district and state levels to enable them to respond creatively to sangha needs and demands. One of the biggest challenges

for the programme has been to keep the focus on a continuous learning process. (An example of the learning process is at Annexure-I) Further since empowerment is not something to be given but to be experienced by one before it can be facilitated in others, the programme provides space for individual decision-making, innovation and creativity^x. Mobilisation and empowerment of programme personnel merits comment. MS has given opportunities for a large number of women with little education, exposure or work experience to move into positions of decisions making thereby ensuring their empowerment. Grassroots level workers (the sahayogini who actually mobilises and organises at the village level) have moved into management positions at the district levels. *Accordingly job requirements such as educational prerequisites have been modified to give due weight age to work experience thereby enabling such upward mobility within the organisation.*

For the women, participation in and the decision to be active in the sanghas has often been the first gateway to be crossed and their first empowered step.^x While poor women are always outside the four walls of the home working and toiling, this is a new experience for both the women and their families. Women meeting for no apparent or specific purpose. The dilemmas are many. For most women it was the ridicule and heckling by village men that is the most difficult for others it is the reactions of the husband. A sangha woman in Tehri, Uttar Pradesh recalls, "my husband told me to stay at home and look after the housework, in stead of going and gossiping. If I was late in cooking his dinner after a meeting, I was beaten." Another woman in Andhra Pradesh recalls the taunts she and her friends faced in the village, "today you could not cook because of the meeting, tomorrow you will ask men to wash clothes. What do you think you are going to do, rule the country?" As most of the women the programme works with are poor women and generally belong to the lower caste, the pressures at home were further exacerbated by the fact that they were mobile in spaces traditionally reserved for men and in many cases for upper caste men only. During a field review in Andhra Pradesh, for instance, the perceptions of what women saw as the greatest benefit from the programme was tellingly brought forward. For the programme person the greatest change from her point of view was the ability of poor women to raise their voices against age-old traditions and prevent the initiation of girls as joginis. For the sangha women, while this was important, what was more significant were their regular meetings at the panchayat building. As one woman said " this change will be there forever. We too have the right to use the panchayat building." This is establishing rights in several ways, the rights of women, poor women and women from lower social castes, and especially the rights of joginis who constituted the majority of that sangha.

Social recognition has gradually given way to respect in most villages and the changes most visible in the public domain. This issue of respect and recognition by the village community is a very critical marker of change for the women. For sangha members from Medak district in Andhra Pradesh, most of who are dalit, the way they were addressed in the village has changed. "Everyone used to call us by our names-Malli ,Pochi. Now they say Mallamma or Pochamma and talk to us with respect". For a Sangha woman in Karnataka, her knowledge of herbal medicine has changed her relationship with the

landlord. "I could not enter the landlords house by the front door, but now that I have learnt to use herbs, he calls me 'doctoramma', and begs me to come to his house".

The hand pump mechanics of Banda district in Uttar Pradesh relish the fact that their new skills have compelled upper caste groups to recognise them as equals. "They would never drink the water which one had touched, but now they have to depend on us for water". They are aware this may not completely change caste relations within the village but nevertheless a significant change in social relations has set in, something they feel the men of their families could not bring about. For sangha women in Saharanpur district in Uttar Pradesh, their growing knowledge of laws and rights has resulted in their being "called to sit in the village panchayat to arbitrate family disputes, because we know the laws". Sangha members from Mahabubnagar district in Andhra Pradesh bask in the changes. "The people who laughed at us and taunted us are now silent. They respect us. Our sangham is like the village elder now-they consult us for everything."

It is not surprising that the first spheres in which sanghas have gained recognition and ensured change has been in the public domain. Further a field from their homes have often been the most effective areas of confident action. Interacting, negotiating and demanding accountability of government functionaries has come much easier than in attempting to change gender relations closer to home. In the public domain there is now a clear identity established for the sanghas. The panchayats and local leaders recognise the role of the sangha in village.

Changes within the household either in terms of lessening of the work load, greater participation in decision making, a more equal status in the household are issues that have not been easily articulated or captured in documentation. As the sanghas have matured there is a clearer exploration and articulation of these areas. Perhaps this is an area that needs more focused research. Most women report that the initial suspicion that their husbands had especially if they were to talk to other men has reduced. Their role in family decisions is what most women report with a great sense of pride, whether it be regarding the acquisition of an asset, the daughter's education or marriage. A woman from Saharanpur district, Uttar Pradesh says, " whenever anything had to be decided in the family, my opinion was never asked. Now, my husband does not decide anything without first consulting me. I used to think of him as my lord and master, now we are companions, we are friends".

*Dave and Krishnamurthy's study, **Home and the World** (2000) that explores women's perceptions of empowerment has been one of the few attempts to examine the changing relations within the household. Change in relations within the household has often been softly and tentatively articulated. The sharing of household work and responsibilities has emerged out of men acknowledging the right of their women to attend sangha meetings. Looking after children, milking the cow, cooking are some of the tasks men have taken over when women are not there. " It is evident that the changes in the relationship with the husbands are not the direct result of confrontation...women engage in strategic planning to maintain relationships. 'We allow men their illusions.' This enables them (women) to negotiate a place for themselves without disturbing the surface of things. "^{xi} Women have reported not only changes in their relationship with husbands but also in*

the relationships with mothers-in-law. And how they are able to assert themselves with respect. For the women the institution of family and marriage continue to be a defining element as they negotiate and tease out spaces ad autonomy of existence and action for themselves.

Even women took time to understand what the sangha is all about. While initially “coming to the sangha meeting was another burden, on top of all our other tasks” as a sangha member from Karnataka recalls, going to the sangha meeting for most women the programme interacts with has become a defining element, “building the sangha and participating in its development is our development”.^{xii} As Dave and Krishnamurthy (2000) have pointed out “the women belong to their families and their identities came from there. Their membership to the family, caste group and political party partly came through their husband. Membership to the sangha belonged to the women independently. They got together on an equal footing, as peers and not as representatives of slots given to them by their families.(for example, daughter, mother or daughter-in-law). They belong here because of themselves”.^{xiii} This emotion and expression emanating from participation in the sangha is variously expressed as “nasha”(intoxicating), “ its like being in my maike(maternal home)”.

A sahayogini from Bihar captures this process of women’s identification with the sangha lucidly, “I remember the time when I had to go from house to house to persuade the women to come out and attend the group meeting...look at the women today...look at the confidence. Today even if I am not there they conduct their meetings regularly. They tackle their own problems themselves at their own level... even confronting higher authorities when necessary. I come to know only after the matter has been solved”.^{xiv}

This close identification with the sangha evolves overtime and is gradually concretised as discussion of problems leads slowly to action. As the learning curve rises, the trajectory of informed, empowered action on the part of the sanghas also changes. In the nascent stages of sangha formation, women have tended to discuss and act to meet needs like pensions, ration cards, maternity assistance, getting street lights, getting drains cleared, hand-pumps repaired, applying for houses among many others. It is in this process that sanghas have coalesced and learnt their first lessons on how to deal with power structures. This has often been the initial experiencing of empowerment, of taking decisions and collectively seeking to resolve their problems. In a letter to a MS district office in Gujarat, a sangha wrote” we have learnt a lot: we have learnt that water is our right and that the government has to give it to us. We learnt to write applications and sign our names. We learnt to go the Taluka office and the district office, and sit in chairs and talk to officers. We learnt about the government and how it works-we have to go back again and again to find out what has been done. It took us time to learn that we can do it!”

While no two sanghas address the same issue at the same time, today we are in a position to broadly categorise the issues being addressed by the sanghas as the following:

- **Education of children especially girls, child labour.**

As indicated later the greatest impact of women's mobilisation has been in the area of girls' education. Often women have taken difficult decisions of withdrawing children especially girls from work and providing them an opportunity for education. Khatimabehn from Rajkot district sent four of her daughters to the Mahila Shikshan Kendra (a residential learning centre) for a period of 8 months. The girls had dropped out after class 4 and were each earning Rs.40 per day in normal circumstances and upto Rs.80 per day during agricultural sessions. Khatimaben preferred losing a huge amount of money, which these girls would have brought in 8 months time, had they not been to Mahila Shikshan Kendra. "All their lives, these girls have been working and in future too, they will work. Let them study and enjoy life for sometime at least." ^{xv}

There is a great concern that their daughters are not in the same position the women find themselves in. A Sakhi (sangha leader) from UP is emphatic "I want to make sure that our daughters and granddaughters are not humiliated by having to make their thumb-marks instead of writing their names."

- **Seeking and obtaining literacy and numeracy skills for themselves**

MS consciously took a decision not to exhort sangha women to acquire literacy skills. Instead waited till the sanghas themselves felt the need to acquire the basic skills of reading and writing. Over the past few years with an increasing number of women standing for elections in panchayat elections, and sanghas also federating at block levels, each sangha recognises the need for at least some of their members to be fully literate. A song composed by sangha women in Gujarat says, "we though we were uneducated but we were only illiterate. Now we know we can learn reading and writing-we know we are not inferior. We are part of this world!"

Though every sangha now has at least 4 to 5 of their younger members who are fully literate, this continues to be an area where the women and the programme are struggling.

- **Health**

Discussions on health have enabled discussions on women's work, nutrition, health status and how all these are determined by women's social status and societal attitudes and perceptions.

In Andhra Pradesh for instance, sanghas especially in Mahabubnagar district decided to withdraw their girls from working in cotton fields as they understood the adverse impact this was having on the health of prepubescent girls and the longterm disadvantage these children face as they lose the opportunity to study.

There has been a consistent effort to retrieve and validate womens' knowledge of herbal medicines. Sangha women in Raichur district in Karnataka say, "Our sangha has got some land from the Panchayat. We have planted an herbal garden so that we can collect

the herbs and make our own medicines. We don't have to depend on the doctors for every small illness."

In Karnataka, sangha women decided on a moonlight dinner festival for themselves to celebrate what they had learnt on nutrition in health trainings. High protein laddoos made of pulses and jaggery, women bringing other dishes were to be the menu. The festival was to be held in a public place in the village so that they could demonstrate many things, their right to enjoy food, their right to look after their health and their right to meet and celebrate in a public place!^{xvi}

- **Livelihood issues, savings and credit, access to government resources, natural resource management**

Addressing livelihood issues has not been easy for the MS programme. How does one mesh this into a primarily educational programme? How does one ensure a critical decision on livelihoods? Given that almost all the members in the sanghas are poor women, livelihood security has been high on the agenda. The programme is still struggling to arrive at a clear understanding on this issue. The fear has been that it is very easy to fall into the same rut of extant governmental efforts that have not really enabled women to move out of the poverty trap, or reduce economic exploitation, or enhance women's skills and capabilities in marketing and management at local levels.

In some states the decision has been taken to build on women's experience and strength and therefore help them to take up land-based activities. In Uttar Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh a fairly large agriculture project has been undertaken by the sanghas to establish the rights of women as farmers, and to undertake an environment and eco friendly and cooperative form of farming. Sanghas are being enabled to access common property resources to bring forests, grazing lands and nurseries within the management and control of the sanghas. Sanghas have started seed and grain banks, and collectively leased land for agriculture and in the case of Assam ponds for fisheries. This is best captured in the slogan of the sanghas in Tehri district in Uttar Pradesh of their rights to jal, jungle and jameen (water, forests and land).

Many sanghas are also engaged in thrift and credit activities. Almost all sanghas have taken decisions that loans will not be given for child marriages, giving of dowry, or celebration of practices against women.

The self help and livelihood group activities in turn have started a spiral of learning writing, numeracy, book keeping and maintenance of accounts.

- **Participation in local governance**

The first lessons of dealing with local power structures came with the decisions of sangha women in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Bihar to actively participate and contest in the panchayat elections. There have been many bittersweet experiences but altogether this has been a heady step forward for women in the process of empowerment. The training for elected women on procedures, roles, functions, resources available to the panchayat have made the elected women well equipped to play an effective role.

Chandravva in Muddebihal taluk in Bijapur ditrict in Karnataka, realised that taxes are an important source of panchayat resources and very necessary if some of the women's agendas were to be addressed. She mobilised the support of the sangha, visited each house and persuaded people to pay their taxes. With the increased revenues the panchayat has constructed community toilets, an anganwadi building and a dhobi ghat. In Athanoor village, Raichur district in Karnataka an all woman panchayat was elected. The lack of toilets that was of urgent concern to both men and women in the village was picked up by the panchayat. The issue was availability of common lands on which these toilets could be built as most of the common land had been illegally taken over by a few people in the village. The panchayat women carried out a survey with the help of the Revenue department. They confronted the land grabbers who had 1 ½ acres of common land under their control, took the land back and began the construction of community toilets.^{xvii}

In Alladurg mandal in Medak district, Andhra Pradesh, Anasuya was elected as the President of the Mandal Parishad as she was literate and had a fair understanding of social issues and problems. Anasuya was in the first group of girls to graduate out of the Mahila Shikshan Kendra. She has now become a symbol of where education could take a girl.

Pushpalatha was elected as a ward member to the panchayat in Ryalapalli village in Gangadhara mandal in Karimnagar district. After attending trainings conducted for elected women, the nature of her participation in the panchayat changed. Armed with information she was able to boldly question the Sarpanch on what he had done with the money earned by the panchayat on auctioning the 2 tamarind trees in the villages. The Sarpanch said he spent the money to buy gate valves for the irrigation system in the village. Pushpalatha and the sangha decided to find out how much the valves cost and where they can be bought. During these enquiries, they came to know from the Mandal Development Officer that the government free of cost supplies these valves, and they got him to give this information to them in writing. This was presented back at the panchayat meeting. Pushpalatha with the support of the sangha pinned the Sarpanch down in public and got him to return the money to the panchayat kitty.^{xviii}

- **Ensuring effective delivery and functioning of government services and structures**

This has been one area of sanghas demonstrating their confidence and directly usingf information they have acquired. Sanghas have ensured that teachesr are regular, and the auxiliary nurse midwife visits regularly especially the dalit colonies. Their interactions with higher level authorities at the block level has also increased and they are now able to interact from a position of strength as their sanghas have become strong and visible at the village level.

- **Articulating their concerns and tackling social issues like alcoholism, violence against women/child marriage, challenging and changing traditions that discriminate against women.**

Challenges to traditions that devalue women have begun to be addressed. In states such as Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh where the devadasi/jogini custom is deeply rooted in the areas where MS is working, sanghas have ensured that no girl is initiated into this custom. In Sitapur district, Uttar Pradesh for instance, the Gudiya Pitahee (beating the doll) on Nag Panchami day is a very popular festival. Dolls representing women and girls are whipped and beaten to shreds in public spaces within villages. A corollary to this tradition is the custom of symbolically hitting a new bride with a stick as she enters her husband's home. This tradition that came up for discussion and what it means for women, led to sanghas in 15 villages deciding to change the tradition, where the dolls instead of being beaten to shreds would be rocked in swings, symbolising care and love for women and girls, and the new bride fed sweets as she enters her matrimonial home. What started off in a small way has become a movement across one block of 70 villages where sanghas have convinced the village communities including religious leaders to make these fundamental changes in the way these traditions are followed.

In all the states, sanghas have become forums to address issues of violence whether it be cases of domestic violence, marital disputes, land fights etc. This has led to the creation of women's courts called Nari Adalats in Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and now in Karnataka. These courts are developing into socially recognised and effective forums. Not only sangha women but also people from the community at large are seeking justice in these courts. Despite the confidence with which sanghas have begun to address these issues, the extent to which they have successfully addressed issues of violence in their marriages is a moot question. There is a great degree of ambivalence. Intervention by the sangha or seeking the support of the sangha seems to happen only in cases where there is a fear of real physical danger.^{xix}

Programme strategies and interventions are essentially as follows: -

- Ensuring information flow on the issues raised by women, using a variety of print and oral media followed by discussion and analysis from a woman's perspective.
- Periodic thematic training's on health, social forestry, environment, panchayati raj, etc
- Skill development in literacy, masonry, herbal medicines, accounts, book keeping etc
- Capacity building in leadership, decision making, negotiation, conflict resolution, participation in local bodies
- Provision of educational alternatives like Mahila Shikshan Kendras, which are residential learning centres and facilitating the emergence of alternative fora for women such as the health centres, women's courts

Over the years a clearer understanding has evolved of the dimensions to the education for empowerment that MS seeks to provide. As the women's collectives and the programme have matured there has been a broader understanding that has unfolded from the initial understanding of enabling women to come together, to be mobile, and find time for themselves to meet and reflect on their lives. As Jain and Krishnamurthy (1997)^{xx} have pointed out three strands of this empowering education can be seen. 1) Education as life skills that validates the existence of self, builds self esteem and confidence through collective strength, enables decision making and planning for the future and action for

change. 2) Education as information and knowledge. This entails not only acquisition but also effective application of this information and knowledge for instance in the areas of health, environment, law, government. schemes and programmes. Knowledge and information is demystified and women are enabled to take action themselves (for e.g. make Primary health centre, the anganwadi, school, block office bank, police station, courts etc accessible and accountable) 3) Education as skills. Acquiring basic skills of reading, writing and numeracy; acquiring skills to directly address livelihood concerns, breaking gender stereotypes by entering male domains and acquiring skills traditionally seen as male and becoming of hand pump mechanics, masons and forest watch and ward.

One of the most effective expressions of women's understanding of their life situations is in the decisions that women across all the states have taken with regard to children's/ girls education. This is manifested in various ways. Taking decisions to send children/girls to schools or the Mahila Shikshan Kendras (residential learning centres) which in several cases means decisions to withdraw children from work and a loss of income to the household. Acting against child marriage and postponing marriage by several years. Ensuring that the educational system is effective through monitoring of schools and actively participating in school bodies such as the village and school education committees. One of the most important markers of this sense of ownership has been the degree of voluntarism and financial support that the sanghas provide to the various educational interventions and bridging courses (like the Bal Mitra Kendras in Andhra Pradesh, Jagjagi centres in Bihar and Jagriti centres in Assam) run by the programme.

Perhaps the greatest and most heartening impact of adult women's empowerment and education has been the impact that it has had on the lives of girls, especially adolescent girls. The focus on adolescent girls has evolved over a period of time. While the programme objectives envisaged that the programme would impact and ensure girls' education, and that appropriate and supportive educational interventions like the Mahila Shikshan Kendras (residential learning centres hereafter referred to as MSK) would be introduced, the issue of girl's education did not surface from the very beginning. In the initial stages of the programme there was a conscious focus on mobilising and organising women. As the sanghas coalesced and discussions began to centre more and more on the status of women, the questions of how to change the future invariably centred on how to equip the younger generation to negotiate and challenge an unequal world.

Providing women with educational opportunities goes back to early years of independence when the idea of a 'condensed course' was first mooted and subsequently became a scheme of the Central Social Welfare Board. These courses left a lot to be desired as they had degenerated into providing meaningless vocational courses, targeted primarily at women in urban areas. They provided neither education nor did they build skills to enable women to eke out a sustained livelihood. When the Mahila Samakhya programme was being designed, one of the major components built in was the concept of the Mahila Shikshan Kendra, the condensed course idea refashioned. The objective of the MSK is to be innovative women centred educational facility for women in rural areas. ^{xxi}

The MSK provides a residential learning opportunity for women and girls denied educational opportunities, either partially or fully. The objectives of the MSKs are to provide rural poor women opportunities for learning in the shortest period in a very conducive and safe environment; to create a pool of well trained, literate and motivated women who can become change agents and leaders in their villages; to enhance the self-image and self confidence of women; and to develop life oriented life skills

Today, in almost all MS states, girls education, strategies for ensuring their education have emerged as central to MS initiatives. The emergence of girls education as a key intervention within MS led to a debate within the National Resource Group, the advisory body of the programme, on whether this would lead to a dilution of focus on Women's education and empowerment. Feed back from the field indicated that as women recognise their own voice and develop an ability to think about their lives, they invariably get concerned about the futures of their girl children. There are clear articulations of a desire for a better future for their daughter and strong demands for alternative learning streams that enable girls, especially adolescent girls to get an opportunity to learn. A parallel trend to the organisation of adult women has been the mobilisation and organisation of girls' forums variously called *balika/kishori sanghas* at the village level. The extent to which the women are committed to their daughter's education is highlighted by recent developments in Andhra Pradesh, where in the MSK at the mandal level *sangha* women play a key role in the management of the centre. Two *sangha* women on rotation spend a month in the centre acting both as wardens as well taking the responsibility of cooking the food for the girls. During this one-month, the two women themselves strengthen their literacy skills.

An often-debated issue has been the impact of the MS programme on the larger educational environment. Twelve years down the line it is clear that the programme has not been able to impact on the scale as anticipated or envisaged. MS impact on mainstream education has to be seen contextually. While the programme as such has not directly changed the face of education, the learning's and experiences of the programme are beginning to be integrated into mainstream education in various ways. The integration of MS strategies with basic education initiatives has worked well in states like Bihar, where MS is an integral component of the Bihar Education project and subsequently the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP). Consequently, a sharp gender focus has been brought into primary education initiatives. The *Jagjagi* centre (*jag* for *jagat* meaning world and *jagi* meaning awakening) for adolescent girls has been up scaled in the DPEP programme under the name *Angana Vidyalayas*

In Uttar Pradesh, in the districts where MS is funded under UP EFA a similar process is on. The interface with DPEP has resulted in sharing teaching methodologies/ and the use of learning materials developed by MS. In Karnataka, *Kusuma*, a gender training manual for Non-formal education instructors developed by MS is being used for training of Alternative School teachers under DPEP. In a more recent development the emergence of MS as a training resource on gender for several basic education and other programmes and organisations in the states where the programme is operational has meant that gradually MS insights and understanding of empowerment, learning processes

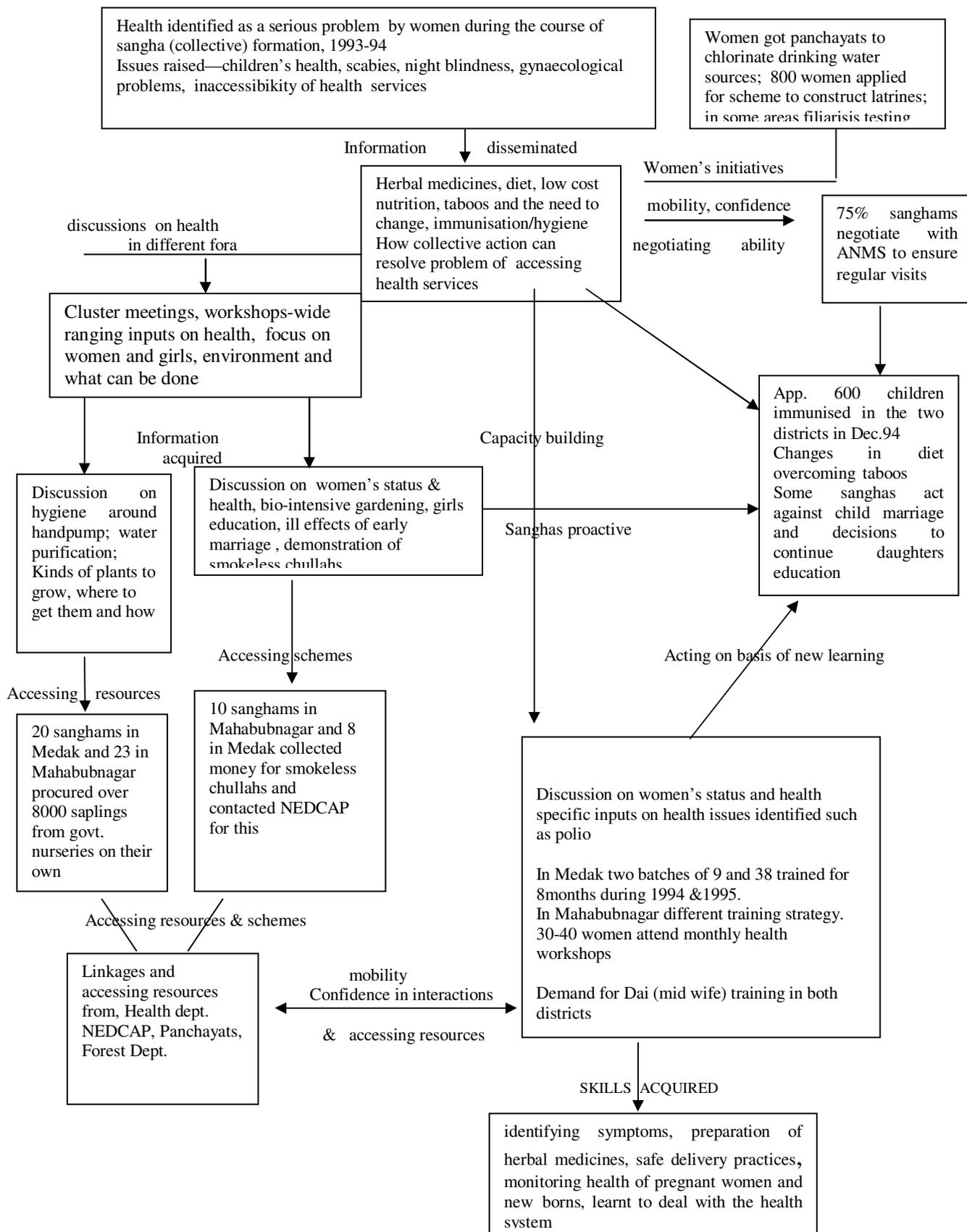
and gender sensitive interventions for the education of women and girls is being disseminated to a wider audience.

However, the issue of impact when examined from the point of view of the sanghas makes its more visible and palpable. Sanghas of poor women are recognised as vibrant, empowered groups at the village level. Poor marginalized women have gained a voice and are emerging as leaders in a predominantly male world. Sanghas are being approached to arbitrate on problems in the village. They are being invited to participate in village development works. The alternative legal forums such as the Nari Adalats/ Mahila Panch (Women's courts) set up and run by the sanghas in Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh have gained in credibility not only as redressal mechanisms accessible and within the control of poor women but by the wider society as well wherein men and women from upper castes have started bringing their problems to these forums for justice.

The stage for sangha women to expand their spheres of activity and influence beyond a single village level is being set through the emergence of sangha federations at block levels. These federations have begun to look at women's / girls concerns as issues that require a broad based movement approach, in which lateral solidarities are critical especially if the village communities at large and women who are not active in the sanghas are to be reached. Children's and girls education is emerging as a critical focus in this process where federations are taking wide ranging decisions to ensure educational opportunities for all children, especially adolescent girls in their blocks, withdrawing children from work, preventing child marriages and striving to increase the age of marriage to the statutory level. So far these decisions were confined to the members of the sanghas now the effort is to influence and change the wider social environment. Livelihoods, nutritional and health security for poor women and their households, security for older women, better access to resources for women, greater say in community affairs, equitable distribution of government resources to poor women are some of the concerns of the Federations. *Perhaps what the MS experience points to is the wide ranging nature of social impact, however uneven it be, when women are mobilised not around a single agenda but helped to think for themselves and act around issues identified by them.* The Federations and the programme are jointly engaged currently to strengthen the capacities of the Federations to sustain this energy and to evolve into fora that keep women's agendas central to their actions.

One would like to conclude with the example of Narsamma of Medak district in Andhra Pradesh. An illiterate, itinerant bard, Narsamma's life has changed with her involvement in the sangha. Narsamma has learnt to repair hand pumps, she is literate, and now helps the programme as a consultant in introducing and starting the programme in new areas and works with sanghas to enable them to understand the concepts of empowerment and learning, using her own life experience as a textbook. There are many Narsammas in the making in all the areas where MS works.

Annexure-I THE LEARNING PROCESS: an example from Andhra Pradesh , Annual Report, 1995



References

ⁱ The programme is being implemented in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Uttaranchal. The success of the Mahila Samakhya programme in conscientising adult women to take decisions in favour of their daughter's education has resulted in Basic Education programmes such as the District Primary Education Programme supporting a Mahila Samakhya intervention as part of their own programme in the States of Bihar, Jharkhan, Assam and Uttar Pradesh

ⁱⁱ Jandhyala, K (1998): 'Women, Empowerment and the State'. **The Indian Journal of Social Work**, Vol 59, Issue 1, January 191-207.

ⁱⁱⁱ The programme title, Mahila Samakhya means *women speaking with equal voice* (*mahila* (woman), *Sam* (equal) - *akhya* (voice)

^{iv} Government of India,(1986), **New Education Policy**, chapter IV

^v Vimala Ramachandran and Srilata Batliwala designed the Mahila Samakhya programme based on discussions with diverse groups across the country. Subsequently Vimala Ramachandran became the first National Project Director, a first in many ways as a non-governmental person was given a national position of Director located in the Department of Education. Srilatha Batliwala was the first State Programme Director of the programme in Karnataka

^{vi} Ibid

^{vii} The programme objectives and the underlying values are set out in unambiguous terms in the form of a non-negotiables that are the basis for project implementation as well as monitoring. These are:

- The initial phase of the project when women are coming together to form collectives and consolidate their independent time and space, must not be hurried or short-circuited
- The pace and content of all activities must be determined by women's collectives at the village level who are participants in it, and women's priorities for learning must always be respected
- All processes and activities within the programme must be based on respect for women's existing knowledge, experience and skills
- Every component and activity within the project must create an environment for learning, help women to experience and affirm their strengths, create time and space for reflection and respect individual uniqueness and variation
- Planning, decision making and evaluation processes, as well as all levels of project personnel must always be accountable to the women's collectives at the village level
- Project structures and personnel must play facilitative and supportive rather than directive roles

^{viii} Vimala Ramachandran, *Engendering Development: Lessons learnt from some efforts to address gender concerns in mainstream programmes and institutions in India*, March 1995(mimeo),p20

^{ix} The following quotes from sanghas are drawn from , GOI (1997), *We can change our world: The Mahila Samakhya Experience,Delhi*

^x Ibid

^{xi} See Anjali Dave and Lakshmi Krishnamurthy, (2000) *Home and the world:Sangha women's perceptions of empowerment.Some reflections*, Alarippu, Delhi

^{xii} See Anjali Dave and Lakshmi Krishnamurthy, (2000) *Home and the world:Sangha women's perceptions of empowerment.Some reflections*, Alarippu, Delhi

^{xiii} Ibid,p.20

^{xiv} Mahila Samakhya Bihar, Report of activities (ud)

^{xv} Mahila Samakhya Gujarat, *Annual Report*, 1998-97

^{xvi} Karnataka Mahila Samakhya, *Annual report*, 2001-2002

^{xvii} Ibid

^{xviii} Andhra Pradesh Mahila Samatha(the Mahila Samakhya programme in Andhra Pradesh, *Annual Report*, 2001-2002

^{xix} Dave and Krishnamurthy (2000) highlight this ambivalence as it emerged in their workshops with sangha women in Bidar district, Karnataka. “One woman succinctly explained, ‘if we work and get freedom (to go out) then in the long term I can work out better terms. In the beginning he beats me, but I will not leave. I will, through good behaviour get the good will of society and then I will have got the general respect to face him and more convincingly bargain. I must protect my chance I have of bargaining (job and respect from the public).’....The issue of violence is not acceptable but it has to be viewed and addressed in the context of women’s prioritization. Acceptance of violence seems to be the short term compromise women are making to achieve long-term gains.”

^{xx} Sharda Jain & Lakshmi Krishnamurthy,(1996) *Empowerment through Sanghas, the Mahila Samakhya experience*, Jaipur

^{xxi} Anita Digha, *Mahila Shikshan Kendras of Bihar, A Study* (1999), Joint GOI-UN system education programme