I N T R O D U C I N G

The Mahila Samakhya Movement

**Innovations towards
Education for
Empowerment**

Grassroots Women's Movement

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The Mahila Samakhya Movement

The police questioning a sangha woman about her interference in a brutal rape case in Uttar Pradesh, "On whose support do you take such big cases? I have the authority of my uniform and my government post, to do what I am doing. On what power are you roaming around at ten o'clock in the night on the road?"

She replied, "Do you want to know what power I have? I have the power of 370 villages of Auriya. Do you want to know beyond that? I have the power of 16 districts in Uttar Pradesh. Do you want to know beyond that? I have the power of eight states in India"

A federation and sangha member, Auriya District, Uttar Pradesh

Globally, the last two decades have witnessed the rise of grassroots women's movements everywhere. These movements are largely led by poor women and are characterized by their efforts to challenge and redefine local development, based on their own vast knowledge of solutions that are viable and practical on the ground. These local community-based movements are increasingly known for their innovative solutions to basic survival issues and their ability to tackle issues that affect not only themselves but the entire community. Women leaders challenge and hold local institutions accountable by ensuring that their functioning is transparent and that they address the needs of the community. Grassroots women's movements in India, like the one represented by Mahila Samakhya (MS), are no exception to this larger global trend.

This movement led by marginalised, poor women has created an alternative paradigm of empowerment for a generation of women, men and even the state. This book is a small attempt to bring out

the voice of that movement which through its articulation of rights and collective strength has led to the empowerment of the poorest and most marginalised among women in its real sense. The massive scale and reach of the movement touching more than 8,00,000 women directly in a country as vast and diverse as India, is by itself, a marvel. The sisterhood that this movement has built in each one of these women is based on one identity that they share, that of being a woman.

The multiplicity of issues, the array of activities and the variety of innovations that these women handle, reaffirms the complexity, not only of this movement but also of the life of every poor woman. It thus becomes very difficult to look at this programme with any one lens. Is this a movement about women's rights, or about education, or is it about development? Does it deal with gender justice, or does it impact governance? It is all that and more. In fact, the movement mirrors the inter-relatedness of issues in the lives of women. However, underlying every action is the belief that the empowerment of women is a vital pre-requisite to facilitate their inclusion in development and governance.

Empowerment is a widely debated term and is ascribed a wide variety of definitions in different socio-cultural and political contexts. The discussion on empowerment of women revolves around freedom of choice, control over their own lives, access to, ownership over and control of assets, the right to opportunities and services, the ability to understand, challenge and transform realities of power relations and finally, the ability to influence events and outcomes of their lives. Empowerment as a concept evolved when conventional development approaches sought to include women as targets to increase the effectiveness of outcomes but failed to question the underlying causes of women's dis-empowerment. Thus, the approach to empowerment has made a deliberate and fundamental shift away from the idea of charity to that of entitlement of rights, from the notion of economic empowerment to holistic development. It clearly demands that political, administrative, and social structures guarantee these rights. Thus, women's empowerment extended its scope beyond the individual, to questioning and challenging power relations and inequalities.

Towards this goal, the World Bank's empowerment framework[1] summarises the roles of state institutions, individuals and civil society. It is critical to have state reforms supporting poor, marginalised people's access to information, inclusion,

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1 Narayan D. (Ed.) (2002), *Empowerment and Poverty Reduction: A Source Book*, Washington D.C, World Bank.

participation and social accountability mechanisms. Equally important is to build local organisational capacity where people can solve their own problems. *Local organisational capacity refers to the ability of people to work together, organise themselves, mobilise resources to solve problems of common interest.*[2] This mobilisation of the community often requires civil society facilitation in terms of strategies to build people's organisations and furthering access to information to solve their own problems.

In India, women's empowerment is an important agenda, and in fact, the explicit stated objective of many state programmes. These mostly constitute poverty alleviation programmes which strive towards the economic empowerment of women. While women are mobilized into collectives through which they access credit, the critique that these collectives do not question underlying gender based power inequalities still holds true. An important caveat to challenging power relations is access to information, as women cannot demand their rights and entitlements unless they are aware of them. Poverty, being a function of lack of access to both resources and information, demands education as the next vital element in the journey towards empowerment.[3]

The National Policy on Education (NPE) as revised in 1992 was a landmark in the field of education in that it recognized the need to redress traditional gender imbalances in educational access and achievement. This led to the launching of the National Literacy Mission in 1988 to eradicate adult illiteracy in India. Traditional literacy programmes, although well intended, were unable to address the needs of poor women. Programme content, often foreign to their lives was "imposed" on women (UNESCO, 2001) as recipients rather than as change agents or active participants. Moreover, these literacy campaigns gave skills to women as individuals, but seldom encouraged women to critically understand, challenge and transform their reality, possible only through collective action. Thus, though state programmes addressed poverty through women's collectives, or adult literacy through individuals, neither could understand nor deal with empowerment in its true sense. The Mahila Samakhya programme, launched in 1988, in pursuance of the goals of the NPE brought both together through the overarching objective of education for empowerment of women.

The Mahila Samakhya Programme

Education in Mahila Samakhya is understood not merely as

acquiring basic literacy skills but as a process of learning to question, critically analysing issues and problems and seeking solutions. It endeavors to create an environment for women to learn at their own pace, set their own priorities and seek knowledge and information to make informed choices. It seeks to bring about a change in women's perception about themselves and the perception of society in regard to women's "traditional roles". This essentially involves enabling women, especially from socially and economically disadvantaged, and marginalised groups, to address and deal with problems of isolation and lack of self-confidence, oppressive social customs, struggles for survival, all of which inhibit their learning. It is in this process that women become empowered.

Source: Mahila Samakhya, Eleventh Plan Document, Government of India, Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2007, p.3.

For the first time through the MS Programme for Action (1992), education was seen as an empowerment tool and included mobilization, critical thinking, information about rights, and legal literacy. It is implemented in the ten states of Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand in identified Educationally Backward Blocks(EBB)[4]. Among these blocks, programme expansion was prioritized in areas with higher concentrations of tribal, scheduled caste, and minority populations.

The programme identified several socio-cultural, economic factors that inhibited women's access to knowledge, information, education, mobility and justice; and that these complex factors could not be tackled without the active participation of women themselves. The principal strategy was to ensure this participation through mobilising and organising women into sanghas – a radical departure from conventional educational programmes, at the time. Unlike traditional literacy programmes, learning was led by the women rather than trainers providing inputs. The *Mahila Sangha* provides the space where women can meet, be together, and begin the process of reflecting, asking questions, speaking fearlessly, thinking, analyzing and above all feeling confident to articulate and negotiate their needs through collective action. Thus, the programme emerged as a combination of literacy, mobilization and collective action ultimately leading to empowerment of women. Today a strong, mobilised women's constituency has emerged through 37,000 sanghas and 150 federations across the country. Box 1.1 provides the objectives of Mahila Samakhya[5].

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2 *Ibid*. p.17.
3 *Ibid*.

4 An educationally backward block is defined as a block where the level of rural female literacy is less than the national average and the gender gap is above the national average. http://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/upload/India/India_NPEGL.pdf
5 *Mahila Samakhya, Eleventh Plan*, 2007, p.5.

MS stands apart from other contemporary development programmes, in that in achieving its goals, it will adhere to certain non-negotiable principles at every stage (Box 1.2). These principles, strongly endorse the philosophy that every action in the programme will be directed by the women, respecting their skills, maintaining a participatory approach and a decentralised, facilitative management. Orienting staff into this philosophy thus

becomes vital to the success of the programme. This philosophy[6] is in turn, consciously embedded into every sangha and every federation.

This philosophical and institutional foundation acts as the base for several practices and innovations shaped by the sangha women themselves. These practices, developed in response to their problems, have had a major impact on individual women, their families, and on the community at large.

Best Practices and Innovations in Mahila Samakhya

This compendium covers best practices from across eight states and attempts to showcase the icons amongst these practices. The final selection of practices include core practices, namely those that are universal across all states as well as innovations which are particular to certain states. The core practices here include the Adult Literacy Programmes, Nari Adalats, Mahila Shikshan Kendras (MSK), and Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBV) while the innovations include the Data Exhibition in Assam and the Panchayat Literacy Programme for Women in Uttarakhand. Federations and sanghas, including kishori sanghas, are the institutional base and have been studied as the main building blocks of the movement.

However, this selection is only a sample from the wide variety of practices across the states. A glimpse of the rich innovations that have emerged over the years across sectors such as health, education, and issues of concern to women are provided below. Several practices have evolved to tackle violence against women. For instance in Uttarakhand, campaigns and awareness camps on the Domestic Violence Act are conducted. Nari Adalats or women's courts have emerged across many states. Kerala Mahila Samakhya's "Disha" is a practice intended to tackle dowry and make a block dowry-free with the help of the local government,

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6 *Mahila Samakhya, Eleventh Plan,* 2007, p.4.

religious organisations, and the community through continuous campaigns. Additionally, Assam, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka run counselling centres where women facing domestic problems could seek legal and psychological help. Health based practices like Jasud Kendras in Gujarat act as alternate health centres to address the diseases of women especially relating to reproductive health. Nari Sanjeevani Kendras in Uttar Pradesh are herbal health centres for men and women. Sangha women in Assam cultivate medicinal plants as a measure to conserve soil as well as preserve traditional knowledge of medicine. Thus, a variety of initiatives raise awareness and support women's collective action on social issues.

The federation is the training ground for women leaders to emerge, many of whom then contest and win elections with the support of the sanghas. The Panchayat Literacy Programme in Uttarakhand has taken this political empowerment a step further through focussed training on political participation of women, while the Data Exhibition initiative enhances citizen participation in governance.

Towards economic empowerment, a rights-based approach was predominantly observed in several states where women demand work through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) and run the Mid-Day-Meal programmes in schools. Practices like Harithamithram in Kerala, encourages rural communities to engage in vegetable farming in their plots towards the goal of self sufficiency. Economic empowerment practices like group-based micro enterprises in Jharkhand, where sanghas run fisheries, as well as individual income generating activities, like women masons in Bihar, have also evolved. Women masons, first and foremost, challenge gender stereotypes and second, take on projects that primarily benefit rural women, like eco-sanitary toilets, platforms for tube-wells, as flood relief measures.

Gender Education, a cross cutting capacity building strategy for sanghas, has now been extended to other stakeholders in the community in several states. A state-wide practice was launched in Kerala where teachers were sensitised on gender to provide girls an enabling environment in schools and the effort is now to influence the school curriculum. Gender education for men is conducted through campaigns and sessions in Karnataka and with Bala Sanghams in Andhra Pradesh to sensitise boys and girls on gender.

Finally, a range of practices with adolescent girls has also emerged through both informal platforms for action, including campaigns and bridge courses aimed at getting dropout girls back into school, to running mainstream schools like the KGBVs, and providing inputs to the National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL) through formal agreements with the State Education Department, to inculcating girls in the rights-based approach of the larger women's movement.

Several problems faced by women are universal and the time has come for these solutions to be shared, understood, and transferred nationally and globally. A comprehensive documentation of every one of those practices within the time frame of a year was not feasible and therefore the study had the difficult task of selecting certain practices to be showcased. The process of selection of practices and reasons for this choice has been described in the methodology section below.

Methodology

Using a participatory, collaborative approach throughout, the study was shaped by MS personnel, researchers and external experts. A combination of methodologies was employed, primarily using a case study approach. Qualitative data collected through field visits, review of documents including reports, training manuals, secondary data, and supplementary materials from nine states informed this study. Quantitative data was collected through formats designed specifically to review trends over the last five years. The entire study was carried out in distinct planned phases: pre-appraisal, preparatory, study implementation and dissemination.

During the **pre-appraisal phase** to short-list practices, Best Practice Assessment Tools were created in collaboration with MS Karnataka and external experts. The study instruments were designed with experts working in the fields of gender, education, policy, governance, community development, and livelihood promotion. These instruments were then tested through pilot studies conducted in Mysore district, Karnataka. This was followed by preliminary visits to nine states to short-list practices which were finalized at a national consultative meeting.

Table 1.1: Practices Documented in 9 states: Ranking and Selection

State	Andhra Pradesh	Assam	Bihar	Gujarat	Jharkhand	Karnataka	Kerala	Uttar Pradesh	Uttarakhand
Federation	Main		Component		Component			Component	
Adult Literacy Programme	Component	Main							Component
MSK			Main		Component		Component		
Nari Adalat				Main		Component		Component	
KGBV								Main	
Bala Sangham & Kishori Mancha	Component								
Women in GP (PLP)									Main
Data Exhibition		Component							
Jagjagi Kendra			Component						

■ Main Practice studied   ■ Components of a practice studied

Best Practice Assessment Tools (Annexure 1.1, Tables 1.1 and 1.2): Through consultative meetings with researchers and experts, assessment tools were designed to help each state select and rank their practices. These instruments were field-tested in Bangalore with MS Karnataka who helped refine them and finalize the criteria for selection of practices. The criteria for selection included the impact of the practice on education for empowerment of women and girls, the need for documentation of the practice, whether the practice was a mature working model, and was it time tested. The first criteria was disaggregated into four distinct indicators which reflect the most important impacts on empowerment including the increase in (a) mobility (b) access and control over resources (c) decision making capacity and (d) access to gender justice. A weighted average was used for the three criteria namely impact, the need for documentation, and the maturity of the practice (see Annexure 1.1 for definitions of these criteria). After short listing the top three practices, states ranked districts on a scale of 1 to 5 based on the effectiveness of implementation, in order to identify the two top ranking districts for the final study.

Piloting the Methodology and Instruments: A conceptual framework was designed by the team along with instruments for women and girls who were active participants of the various practices, internal stakeholders and external stakeholders. The instruments for five practices (Gender Education for Men and Boys, Kishori Group, Mahila Shikshan Kendra, Nari Adalat, and Saakshar Samakhya Karyakrama) were field tested in Mysore district, Karnataka in November 2009 and research personnel trained on the instruments rigorously. This helped all researchers arrive at a common understanding on the case study methodology, the framework of analysis, the research questions, and each instrument. Five teams, from both Best Practices Foundation and Mahila Samakhya, consisting of a combination of 25 researchers and practitioners from several districts of Karnataka carried out the pilot study. Results of the five pilots were reviewed by both researchers and practitioners and the instruments were redesigned.

Preliminary visits: Nine MS states were visited by researchers during December 2009 who identified the top three practices from each state and the districts where the practice was most effective. These visits provided an overview of MS activities for all practices, state specific innovations, and processes that needed to be captured during the actual study. During these visits, stakeholders were identified for the top three practices, and related secondary information was collected including state annual reports for the preceding five years, progress reports, studies, and resource materials. Timing of the study was determined based on practice specific processes in collaboration with field practitioners.

Finalizing the practices: At a consultative meeting in January 2010 in Delhi, national and state representatives reviewed the methodological framework and the practices selected. Seven major practices were finally selected to be studied across the country. Additionally, outstanding components of these practices were identified to be studied across states. The research aspects to be studied in depth included the genesis, milestones, the process of evolution over time, strategies employed, impact, challenges faced internally and externally, and finally lessons learnt, specifically for main-streaming and sustainability. Table 1.1 presents the final selection of best practices and components across all states. The final selection was intended to capture a sense of the complexity arising from the cross-cultural setting and the variation in the actual interventions.

Designing the Case-Study methodology including the Results Framework: The findings of the pilot were analysed in January 2010 to refine the conceptual framework and to arrive at the overarching cross-cutting questions for the study (see Annexure 1.2). Detailed instruments were designed for each category of

stakeholder for every practice. Each instrument was refined further with the help of subject-experts and finally in consultation with the respective states where the practices would be studied.

Implementation Phase: During the period of February to July, each state was visited by a team of five to six researchers, often including subject-experts for the select practice. The team spent ten to fourteen days in the field covering two to three districts and the state head office. Researchers interacted with the participants of the programme, community members, members of other village institutions, as well as the field functionaries. A total of 706 women and girls were interviewed individually and in focus group discussions. A total of 334 staff including field staff, districts and state heads were interviewed. Finally 115 external stakeholders including government officials, lawyers, doctors, NGOs, teachers, external trainers, police, local panchayat representatives, youth groups, and family members of the women and girls were interviewed (see Annexure 1.3).

Structured and semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and free interactions helped draw out the impact on individual participants as well as their families and the larger community. Formal sessions with the MS personnel who facilitated the process, helped provide an understanding of the overall vision, strategies implemented, as well as the lessons learnt behind the practices. The most updated quantitative data showing the trends of all practices in that state as well as overall

staffing, coverage and reach of MS was analysed to arrive at the overall national picture. On-going sharing across the research team through intermittent review meetings and with state personnel helped inform the final analysis. Follow-up visits to almost all states, conducted over two to three days from August to October helped clarify and further strengthen the analysis. The final analysis was arrived at only after addressing the critiques from each state and a second set of experts familiar with the

practice and the organization. The last phase included **dissemination** of findings through workshops, and distribution across the states of the final compendium of best practices in November 2010.

The main limitations of the study were determined by the decision to examine the practice in the areas where it was most effective, resulting in the findings not being representative of the practice across the country. The entire study was conducted in a period of a year which limited the time spent in the field. Consequently, several extremely relevant innovations could not be examined and in some states inadequate time was spent. This being a one-time assessment provided only a snap-shot at a moment in time, rather than a longitudinal analysis. The study being primarily qualitative also had its limitations in that it was not supplemented by statistical analysis.

Scope of the Compendium

Although best practices were examined in a state where it resides as an ideal, the case studies of core practices borrow strategies, lessons and impacts from other states, where relevant. The purpose is thus to bring out the best of each practice from across states, as an ideal, which the country can then take forward. A snapshot of the practices in the compendium is provided below:

Federations: As the sanghas matured into strong, independent collectives, they federated to provide women a common forum to raise and resolve social issues at higher levels. The federation, studied primarily in Andhra Pradesh is the building block of the movement that reaches out to women, both within the sanghas and outside, to negotiate health, education, governance, economic and legal issues and helps keep the sanghas unified and alive. Federations also act as intermediaries between the sanghas and the administration, disseminating relevant information, networking with panchayats and government departments, to ensure that women have the information necessary to access their entitlements. Their long term objective is to take the movement forward independently when MS withdraws.

Adult Literacy Programme studied in Assam, has the vision of imparting need based literacy and numeracy, embedded in a holistic framework of education for empowerment. Literacy is imparted through camps followed by Jagrity Kendras which are literacy centres located in the village. The responsibility of running literacy classes is given preferably to a sangha woman, in the absence of whom, another educated woman from the same village is chosen. In addition to using literacy primers, motivational songs, and games, the centres use case stories to demonstrate the ill-effects of illiteracy as part of the teaching

strategy. A distinguishing feature of the Jagrity Kendras, unlike other adult literacy programmes, has been the relevance of learning for women in their daily lives. As a result, more than 60,000 women became literate in Assam alone.

Panchayat Literacy Programme for Women in Uttarakhand promotes women's political participation as elected women representatives (EWRs) in the Panchayati Raj Institutions, as well as citizen participation in the Gram Sabha. It creates awareness among EWRs and the community on the overall Panchayati Raj system, the roles and responsibilities of the elected representatives, provides information on programmes, panchayat finances, and encourages gender equity among Panchayat members. This initiative has brought thousands of sangha women into power expanding their sphere of influence and ability to exercise their rights as citizens in the democratic process.

The Data Exhibition, an innovation of Assam led by the federation, is a powerful planning and monitoring tool. Information is collected through household surveys and exhibited alongside official data in a public place for the benefit of the entire community. Using the Right to Information Act, women obtain access to official data. Representatives of the Panchayats, line departments, and even District Collectors are invited and attend these exhibitions. This compiled data, when exhibited publicly, has increased the information base of women to better negotiate their entitlements and improved transparency of the local bodies. It illustrates the importance of authentic data for implementation and demonstrates the effective participation of the community in governance. The impact has been seen, with the poor and women actually accessing their entitlements as a direct outcome of the Data Exhibition. It is an innovation with enormous potential for community participation in local governance.

The Nari Adalat is an alternative justice forum formed across

caste, marital status, age, religion, region, and occupations which addresses issues of violence against women, and helps women access their rights as citizens. The Nari Adalat studied in Gujarat, provides women a forum that delivers justice which is timely, gender sensitive and affordable, unlike traditional and formal justice forums which could be intimidating, biased against women, and often corrupt. Nari Adalat members resolve cases (domestic violence, divorce, and rape) using a consultative, community based process that is inclusive and builds consensus between both parties, while centre-staging women's needs.

Work with Adolescents MS programme has not left out the adolescents from its ambit; rather it plays an important role in empowering young adolescents through mobilizing them into collectives called **Kishori Sanghas** (also known as **Kishori Groups** or **Kishori Manchas**). To address the issue of

discrimination of girls' access to education MS has established **Mahila Shikshan Kendras** (MSK), residential learning centres, which offer an innovative comprehensive educational programme with a specially designed academic curriculum for drop out and never enrolled girls. Within a short span of eight to eleven months the girls are equipped to exercise their choice about their rights regarding getting back to mainstream schools, postponing their marriages and joining the labour force. Along the lines of the MSK model, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) has introduced **Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas** (KGBV) since 2004. The KGBVs are a step forward towards providing quality education for classes VI to VIII to girls from minority communities and marginalised families. MS plays a dual role in implementing the KGBV programme; on the one hand MS runs KGBVs in their operational areas; on the other hand it provides quality input in the form of teachers' training and monitoring the programme. Many of the innovations of MS run KGBVs has been adopted by SSA and are introduced in other KGBVs. Although both MSKs

and KGBVs can cater to a few girls due to their limited capacity, both these institutions have a wider reach in the entire district in terms of spreading the MS philosophy through their alumni.

Kishori Sanghas are located at the other end of the spectrum which organise adolescent girls of a village into a collective in order to create second generation leaders who are gender sensitised and are aware of their rights. Members of the Kishori Sanghas meet regularly to discuss their issues. MS ensures that they receive training on issues such as child rights, prevention of child marriage, and so on. Life skills and vocational exposure further equip them with the confidence and skills to challenge any form of gender discrimination faced in their homes and communities. Taking this initiative a step forward is the **Bala Sangham** which includes adolescent boys.

The **Jagjagi Kendra** is a special innovation encompassing aspects of both MSK and Kishori Sangha. It provides systematic educational input over a longer period of time preparing girls for regular schools. At the same time, being located at the village level, it has a strong linkage with the sangha which together enables them to challenge patriarchy. The compendium provides a comparative analysis of MSK, KGBV, Kishori Mancha, Bala Sangham and Jagjagi Kendra initiatives studied across six states.

although examined in separate chapters, are closely intertwined and together contribute to the overall objective, namely that of empowerment.[7] Each practice is a powerful reminder of the potential hidden within these women, who have chosen to transform reality and create a new space, where poor marginalised women can participate effectively in all spheres.

A detailed, qualitative examination follows for select practices of the enormous work done by the programme, which envisages a society free of gender inequalities and gender based social evils and barriers. Using a case study approach the process, strategies, impact, and lessons learnt are examined for each practice. Each of these institutions, practices and strategies,

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7 For details on each of these strategies referred to throughout the compendium please see Annexure 1.4.

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