

MAHILA SAMAKHYA PROGRAMME: Genesis

BACKGROUND

The Mahila Samakhya programme was launched in 1988 in pursuance of the goals of the New Education Policy (1986) and the Programme of Action as a concrete programme for the education and empowerment of women in rural areas, particularly of women from socially and economically marginalised groups.

1. 1. The policy framework:

1.1 Provision of educational opportunities for women and girls has been an important part of the national endeavor in the field of education since Independence. Though these endeavours did yield significant results, gender disparities persist, more so in rural areas and among disadvantaged communities.

1.2 The National Policy on Education (NPE, 1986) as revised in 1992 was a landmark in the field of policy on women's education in that it recognized the need to redress traditional gender imbalances in educational access and achievement. The NPE also recognized that enhancing infrastructure alone will not redress the problem. It recognized that *"the empowerment of women is possibly the most critical pre condition for the participation of girls and women in the educational process"*.

1.3 The programme of Action (POA, 1992), in the *section "Education for Women's Equality"* (Chapter-XII, pages. 105-107), focuses on empowerment of women as the critical precondition for their participation in the education process. The POA states that education can be an effective tool for women's empowerment, the parameters of which are:

- enhance self-esteem and self-confidence of women;

- building a positive image of women by recognizing their contribution to the society, polity and the economy;
- developing ability to think critically;
- fostering decision making and action through collective processes;
- enable women to make informed choices in areas like education, employment and health (especially reproductive health);
- ensuring equal participation in developmental processes;
- providing information, knowledge and skill for economic independence;
- Enhancing access to legal literacy and information relating to their rights and entitlements in society with a view to enhance their participation on an equal footing in all areas.

These parameters informed the framing of the objectives of the MS programme.

2. GENESIS OF THE PROGRAMME

2.1 The Project Formulation, which started in March 1988, evolved through a process of consultation and debate with

- a) voluntary agencies in 10 districts spread over three States identified for project implementation about the feasibility of initiating a project for women's empowerment and education;
- b) discussions with Government officials and educationists in the three States on the Draft Document
- c) discussions with women's groups about the role of education in the process of empowerment, especially of rural women and girls

2.2 The debates centered around two issues – (i) programme objectives and strategies, (ii) management structures.

2.3 The discussions stressed the complex set of socio-cultural and economic factors that constrain women, especially rural poor women, and which keep them out of the educational process. These factors reinforce a negative self-image among women, and their work, demands and perspectives receive little recognition and respect.

2.4 The discussions highlighted that if women are given an opportunity to plan what kind of education they want, the enthusiasm generated in such an exercise will invariably strengthen the education components. The fundamental issues that influence women's education – low status, survival tasks and poverty – are essentially outside the educational domain and yet education may be the critical factor that could help women break out of their predicament. The entire range of social, cultural and economic factors that have inhibited women's access to knowledge, information, education, mobility and justice cannot be tackled through piecemeal interventions. The complex inter-linkages between social and personal factors, one reinforcing the other cannot be tackled without the active participation of women in a self-driven and self-motivated strategy for a basic change in the mind-sets of the individual and people in society. Movement from a passive state where women accept their predicament and relate to the world around as recipients of welfare and charity to one where they become active agents in their own transformation is the essence of empowerment.

2.5 In the Mahila Samakhya Programme, therefore, the empowerment of women is seen as a critical precondition for the participation of women and girls in the education process. The principal strategy identified for ensuring women's participation is through mobilising and organising them into sanghas (collectives). It was decided that the best way to achieve this would be to follow a strategy where the programme would not lay down either targets to be achieved or specific agenda to be followed but would take its programmatic cues from the women in the Sanghas.

2.6 The predominant composition of the Mahila Sanghas is SC/ST women, women belonging to land-less and marginalised families, who are engaged in wage labour. This is the very group that is most alienated from educational and other Government programmes and processes. Reaching them has been a difficult but exhilarating process.

2.7 Having decided on a radical departure from conventional programmes, the issue of an appropriate management structure came up. A review of the then existing management systems for government programmes was undertaken. After a series of discussions on the management of Women's Development Programme in Rajasthan, DWCRA and poverty alleviation programmes, the following management issues were identified as non-negotiables:

- The programme should be built on a partnership between the government and non-government organisations

- The management structure should be supportive and facilitative one
- The implementation structure of the programme should draw on the best aspects of the governmental and non-governmental structures, striking a balance between checks and balances of the government structure and flexibility and openness of a non government structure.
- Selection of programme functionaries, trainers and resource support should be made on the basis of commitment, aptitude and quality.

2.8 It was decided that the programme would be implemented through autonomous registered societies set up at the state level. The rationale behind this was that an autonomous Registered Society alone can provide the flexibility to administer an innovative programme while at the same time retaining the authority of the Government structure. The problem of flow of funds was also an important criterion. Experiences of other innovative programme have shown that delay in the release of funds especially to the Districts and the villages can effectively strangle a programme. Thus, to simplify the procedure and to ensure smooth flow of funds, implementation through a Registered Society under the broad guidance of the Education Minister and Education Secretary of the concerned State was decided on. Being a Central Sector Scheme, this arrangement was also found to be convenient by the Central Government. In the Executive Committee and the General Council, the membership includes representatives of both Government of India, the concerned State Government and from outside the Government.

2.8 It was decided to implement the programme as a pilot in 10 districts in the states of UP, Karnataka and Gujarat, representing three regions of the country. The Department of education selected the districts after extensive consultations with state governments. The districts were selected following meetings with State government officials and voluntary organisations. The following criteria for district selection was decided:

- districts with low female literacy, poor enrolment and retention of girls in the school system and low level of socio-economic development
- Districts where supporting inputs would be available from other development programmes like ICDS, IRDP, DWCRA
- Districts in which dynamic voluntary organisations are working
- Districts which are representative of the different regions within the state.

2.9 In April 1989, the Government of Netherlands agreed to fund the programme, as it was envisaged.

Launching the programme

2.10 Launching the programme was a challenge and Mahila Samakhya had to adapt and mould itself to the conditions prevailing in each State. In April 1989, Mahila Samakhya Societies were registered and operationalised in Karnataka and Gujarat.

2.11 In Uttar Pradesh the programme evolved differently. For over two years from September 1988 to September 1990, the Mahila Samakhya Society could not be operationalised and the programme was started with the help of local voluntary organisations and dedicated women's' groups through a grant in aid arrangement. This situation was not found wholly satisfactory, as it did not ensure that the basic tenets of the programme are not diluted. It was finally decided that the programme be transferred to the MS Society that was registered in 1990.

2.12 The autonomous structure, flexibility in strategies as well as involvement of people from outside government to make the programme effective has emerged as the basis for the successful functioning of the programme.

2.13 What has emerged out of this experience, is a flexible and vibrant structure that is neither Government nor non- Governmental. The programme has sought to adapt the best elements from both. The programme continues to innovate and evolve new directions based on experience and understanding. There has been considerable streamlining of budgets, plans and procedures. Strategies are continually being reviewed and changed to ensure sustainability of processes. New strategies are being developed for making Sanghas independent of MS through the creation of sangha federations, especially in the older areas. In the newer expansion areas, like Assam, a focus on self-reliance is being built in from the initial stages of mobilising women into sanghas.