

National Evaluation - Mahila Samakhya, Bihar (December 2004)

Executive Summary

Mahila Samakhya in Bihar was initiated as an integral component of the Bihar Education Project (BEP)¹ in 1992. It was started in four BEP districts - Sitamarhi, Rohtas, Ranchi (now in Jharkhand) and West Champaran. The following year it was extended to Muzaffarpur and East Singhbhum (also in Jharkhand now). In 1994 a new district Sheohar was carved out of Sitamarhi. In 1998 it was launched in Gaya, Bhojpur, and Darbhanga districts. In 2001 when Rohtas was bifurcated, MS blocks fell in the new district of Kaimur. At present MS reaches out to 34 blocks across 9 districts of Bihar. A break up of the number of blocks and villages, in which the programme was started along with the number of blocks covered at present, is given below to provide an overview of the physical expansion of the programme.

Year	Blocks	Villages	Samoohs	Women in Samoohs
1992-1993	15	446	124	1300
Total up to Nov.2004	34	2089	2875	66654

With women and girls, especially from Scheduled Castes and Tribes, being the focus group of women's empowerment, MS interventions gained impetus during its initial phase. By the end of 1996 MS was covering total of 1700 villages in 26 blocks of the State. Formation of Mahila Samoohs (women's groups) was part of the MS project in BEP districts, which inculcated a sense of collective responsibility, leading to accelerated implementation and improved monitoring of the project activities at the grassroots level. Subsequently, DPEP III was launched in the State in 1997-98. Since then all the educational initiatives are being covered under DPEP III with BEP Council as its state level implementing agency. Within this the Mahila Samakhya Programme is also covered as the Women's Development Programme Component.

Target areas/ groups

In pursuit of the MS objectives the programme definitely focuses on Districts and Blocks that are socio-economically the most disadvantaged, with the lowest human development and economic indicators. More specifically, the criteria for selecting the Districts are low female literacy rate², the presence of educationally backward blocks identified in the recent Census, a high percentage of SC/ST population and a high percentage of population below the poverty line. The districts in which literacy campaigns were held were also a priority. For selecting the Blocks the same criteria were operational in addition to others such as low girl child population, high IMR (Infant Mortality Rate). In

¹ Bihar Education Project was launched in 1991 by the joint collaboration of Government of India, UNICEF and Government of Bihar as a response to the challenges faced in the State's Education scenario. BEP, the first Education for All programme in India, is a registered Council

² Female Literacy rate in 1991: - W.Champaran-14.41; Sitamarhi-15.49; Sheohar-14.34; Gaya-24.02;Muzaffarpur-22.33; Kaimur-20.69

some cases flood prone areas, crime infested pockets have been given special attention. The areas where regressive social customs have further suppressed women's lives (like *pardah*, bigamy, dowry and child marriages etc) are also taken into consideration. At the village level the most marginalized groups are selected viz. SC (especially the Musahar, Ram and Paswan castes), ST, OBC groups and the Minority community.

Impact

As many of the samooh members of Rori Dhia village in Gaya District said - "*Our language, way of talking and thinking has changed. Now we don't waste our time in gossiping, we try to think together, be together, work together, act together for the upliftment and welfare of women, family and village*".

The impact of MS interventions has to be measured in consonance with the eco-socio-cultural context and developmental ground realities in Bihar. It is the only State in India with a literacy level below 50% and ranking last among the 32 States according to Human Development Index and Gender Disparity Index³. Therefore it provides an extremely challenging environment for any sort of developmental intervention. However, when almost a decade ago, MS was launched here the situation was much grimmer. With the sex ratio of 907 and female literacy abysmally low at 22%, women in Bihar were faring the worst on almost all the social/human development indicators, which in turn reflected the continued denial of their civil, political, economic and social rights. Given this, initiating a programme - with a vision of women's equality and empowerment, and sustaining it, was certainly a rocky path to tread. While assessing the impact of programme in different areas, old or new, mature or not so mature, the common thread that runs across all the indicators is - the women have made it this far against all odds can go further, given the opportunities and resource facilitation.

The MS programme with its women centered and process oriented approach has made a visible impact on the lives of poor marginalised women. During the discussions with community members (other than samooh women) they expressed that samoohs have made a perceptible difference in the overall environment of the village - specially in areas of education, health, hygiene and sanitation. As one community member in Darbhanga district commented '*the sensitivity to the needs of our people and the commitment with which samooh members have worked in our community is commendable and has left a mark on all of us.*'

Issues related to gender discrimination and violence against women are being raised at community level and they cut across class and caste divides (in some pockets on certain issues), particularly in the strong samoohs. Along with these many other social issues - caste /class discrimination, child labour, dowry, child marriage, alcoholism etc., are also being addressed by women at family, village and community level, using their collective strength as a pressure group.

³ Source : GOI (2001), National Human Development Report, Planning Commission, New Delhi

These issues, particularly regarding domestic violence, dowry demand/ harassment and early marriage of girls, have also been taken up by the samooch members in non-MS villages where it was brought to their notice and their intervention was sought. An important and growing indicator of samooch empowerment has been the confidence with which the women have been addressing issues of oppression and violence. The samoochs have emerged as vocal and effective informal forums that have gained community respect and acceptability in handling cases of private and public harassment of women on all fronts. While addressing a wide range of issues the underlying experience of all the samooch members has been of attitudinal change towards girls, women and society and a strong belief in their own capabilities and self-worth.

The impact of a strong samooch is not only visible in their own lives but also in their families and surroundings. The women admitted that now they play a decisive role in the decision-making process of their families as well as other forums. They also felt that their work is taken up on a priority basis at the government offices. Even the people notice and wonder at the confidence and visibility of these women at Block Offices, Banks and in the Panchayat. In villages where samoochs are strong, women actively participate in Gram Sabha meetings and raise issues on development work for the village. The presence of active and vocal women from samoochs in Panchayats has made a difference in the development agendas at the village level.

Since MS Bihar has been an integral part of BEP and DPEP - girls' education has been its focal agenda. There is an apparent increase in the overall literacy status (enrolment, retention of girls particularly) in the areas where samoochs have been working very strongly. Samooch members have been elected as the President, Secretary or members of Vidyalaya Shiksha Samiti (School Education Committee). Even the women, who are not in any formal committee, exert a strong influence to demand accountability of education services in their respective areas. Contribution of MS in the village level educational scenario can be assessed by the fact that in Gaya district out of the total 249 villages covered by MSP 36 percent villages have 100% enrollment in the primary school. It is not the numbers that get the attention, but the confidence with which women stand up to record the fact that these enrollments are only due to MS initiatives!

Women and girls at all levels of MS are extremely aware of the value of information on reproductive health, sanitation, nutrition, safe drinking water, garbage disposal and other hygienic practices. These issues are taken up at different health committee meetings. Health committee members are responsible for raising awareness about issues related to health and hygiene, reproductive health, sanitation, AIDS, immunization, the environment and developing toilet habits. Use of herbal and home remedies are encouraged in the samoochs, the Jagjagi Kendras and the MSK.

The MS women receive recognition and support from their respective Mukhiyas. In fact many expressed a strong desire to stand for the post of Mukhiya (Village Chief) in the next elections. The women elected in PRI are working towards making the government services and resources available to their areas. The community members look up to them for their honesty and sincerity.

Poor women in the programme took up savings and credit activities for consumption loans, such as emergencies, illness or marriage in the family, education of children and other household consumption. But later with the maturity and institutionalisation of samoohs the lending pattern also changed. Now women take loans for individual or group income generation activities to become economically self-reliant. Samoohs have taken up credit activities through informal financial operations based on group-based lending and saving.

In Bihar the process of federation formation is in a nascent stage. There is a very high level of aspiration and zeal among the samooh women and the MS district and state teams for the federations to become strong and recognizable entities to advocate and work for gender equity. The preparation process is ongoing and is quite intensive and rigorous therefore it is rightfully taking its own time and space to evolve.

Information dissemination and knowledge building

The Sahyoginis and the samooh women act effectively as the providers and disseminators of the relevant information on education, health, nutrition, social and gender issues etc. MS has been working continuously on awareness generation and information dissemination through:

- Community mobilisation activities - community meetings and issue-based campaigns/rallies are organised at local level for awareness generation.
- Sammelans and Melas are organised at a larger scale at cluster, unit and district levels for advocacy focussing on the six identified issues.
- Print media e.g. pamphlets, brochures, flyers, posters, banners are the most preferred tools for creating awareness and promoting relevant issues as they attract attention and cause message retention.
- Folk Media including issue based folk songs, *Nukkads* (street plays) developed in local context are also being used extensively for reaching out to non-literate women and the community.
- Women also organise meetings to celebrate international and national days/events viz. International Day for Women, Gandhi Jayanti etc.
- Under UNICEF Supported Total Sanitation and Meena Campaigns videos are also being used for awareness building drives.

Given the importance of role that these women play in information dissemination, enhancement of their own capability and knowledge becomes imperative. The capacity building initiatives include exposure visits, awareness generation/training on the functioning of local government (PRI) and other institutions, information regarding relevant government programmes, schemes and services etc. Women also undergo skills development in basic functional literacy, legal literacy, masonry, herbal medicines, accounts, book keeping etc.

Partnership and linkages with government schemes/programmes

MS is already actively involved in enrollment drives, rallies, microplanning, maa-beti melas etc for community mobilisation. The MS experience is now being integrated into SSA through the NPGEL initiative. It has the responsibility of implementing NPEGEL in its programme areas, and expansion in the districts has been undertaken in NPEGEL Blocks too. The district units have successfully forged links between the programme beneficiaries and relevant Government Departments like Health, Public Health Engineering Department (PHED), District Rural Development Agencies (DRDA), Department of Social Welfare for Social, Tribal Welfare, ICDS, NABARD etc.

The samooths have also successfully made their inroads in the PRIs. The women actively participate in Gram Sabhas, Vidyalaya Shiksha Samitis (VSS) and Village Water Sanitation Committees (VWSC). This is noticeable in the various ways that departments take the collaboration of MS in implementation of their programmes at the village level. The programme has developed a good coordination with the Health, Welfare, DRDA and the PDS departments to facilitate accessibility of government schemes to the rural poor, particularly women. Its support is taken by the administration for flood relief activities in flood prone /affected areas. Bank officials also speak very highly of the good loan returns from MS samooths. All this confirms the grassroots credibility of the programme.

Monitoring, Review and Planning

With a view of optimising the effectiveness of interventions internal reviews and monitoring processes are built in the programme design as part of implementation activities. Regular monitoring, review and reflection systems have been developed at all levels. These processes are participatory in nature thereby enhancing accountability of everyone involved in the programme. The processes for review and monitoring are designed for intensive and detailed analysis of achievements, constraints, strengths and gaps of various components.

The Planning process in MS is need based, participatory and decentralised. The District unit is the basis for planning and budgeting. MS Core Team members (State/District functionaries) meet before the beginning of the financial year to prepare the Annual Work Plan and Budget (AWPB). Once the basic framework is agreed upon plans are prepared at the District level and submitted to the District Project Coordinators (of DPEP). Subsequently, as practiced in other DPEP areas, the AWPB is consolidated and incorporated in the overall district plans and sent to BEP State Office for finalisation of the State Plan. The MS functionaries have to keep the DPCs informed about the status of programme implementation. Despite all the need based, realistic planning, factors such as midterm transfer of a DPC, level of gender sensitivity of the person in charge etc. affect the functioning of the MS programme adversely.

Organisational Issues

Since MS is a part of the larger BEP structure, it comes under the administrative and managerial purview of the Council. Both at the State and District level programme functionaries have to depend upon the BEP office for administrative and logistical

support. They have to `adjust/negotiate' with their BEP colleagues for the basic office facilities like photocopying of documents, computer usage etc. Usage of vehicle is also a major bone of contention. Few jeeps were allotted to MSP in the initial phase, all of them except one, are being used for the BEP programme. Availability of vehicles and their use is ascertained by the nodal BEP authorities and allocation for them made according to their needs and priorities, which affects the mobility of MS staff.

Apparently the `show case' component for the Education Programme - MS- gets the least priority in the larger administrative and managerial set up of BEP. As one the Core Team members somberly said " *MS being a women's programme gets the least importance, the situation is similar to the status of women in our society. At times when we bring up these problems - we are laughed at as being a Mahila Samasya Karyakram'* - reflects on the level of anguish and frustration these women have to go through.

Paucity of staff and its consequent impact on programme implementation is also visible. With the ever-growing nature of demands at field level the functionaries are extremely pressurised and stretched by the work burden and this is affecting the pace and quality of the programme. No efforts have been made to fill the vacancies due to recruitment restriction in BEP since 1998.

Currently with the ongoing preparations for Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, the apprehension level of MS personnel in the State is also mounting - the common concern being the changing role of MS. It is strongly felt that with the movement from one programme to another (from BEP to DPEP and now SSA), once again the role of MS Bihar would take a detour from its original conceptualised format. Though under SSA special efforts of mobilization and organization of women, 'back to school' camps for adolescent girls, large-scale process based constitution of Mahila Samoohs would be attempted, the focus would remain on mainstreaming. Instead of MS initiatives being covered separately it would be blanketed under `Innovative Activity for Girls' Education'.

At this juncture the programme, which believes in providing ample time and `space' for women's empowerment, is striving for its own `space' - for autonomy. The issue of autonomous structure for MS was frequently raised at different levels of discussions. With the programme functionaries and stakeholders being in favour of the idea of autonomy for MS, the situation is extremely favourable - if MS, Bihar has to become autonomous at any point of time - it is NOW!

Some critical issues identified during the Mission are :

- Within the recommended autonomous structure for MS, its capacity needs to be strengthened to meet the expanded roles and responsibilities.
- Time bound phasing of the programme needs to be sensitive and flexible to accommodate different levels of capacities and readiness of the programme functionaries and structures.
- Additional personnel need to be urgently recruited at all levels, to meet the programme goal and expansion.

- Besides extending resource support to the District Units the State MS Office needs to play its leadership role with greater clarity.
- The human resource policies and processes, financial rules and regulations, need to be in place, before the autonomous status of MS takes shape. This will help in implementing the programme when it is de-linked from BEP.

Recommendations

a) Autonomy

The Mission strongly recommends that Mahila Samakhya, Bihar be registered as an autonomous body on the same pattern as other MS States e.g. MS - UP, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, since the present conditions are ripe for such action.

Formal organisational structure of MS under Mahila Samakhya Society would require changed management strategies for organisational change. The eminent need would be effective recruitment and selection through appropriate, open and transparent procedures. Quality and capability of the personnel occupying crucial positions at State and district level has to be ensured. Extensive support, cooperation and guidance from National Office and State Education Department at this critical juncture become imperative.

b) Expansion and Outreach

The programme needs to evolve new operational strategies for geographical expansion in the new blocks and villages through federations. There is an critical need for strategic and sustained planning in case of lateral expansion. **If however, the programme is consolidating its status as an autonomous body, it should put expansion on hold for a year.**

c) Samoohs/ Federations

Definite need for focussed and sustained inputs for strengthening of weak Samoohs/federations - the processes of samooh formation and strengthening should not to be diluted at the cost of accelerating federation formation. During the process of Federation formation the mass base of the samoohs (weak, average and strong) needs to be carried forward along with strengthening.

Future relationship and scope between MS State Society and State Federation of Samoohs are to be worked out. National Office should envisage guidelines and directions for this partnership in case of its eventuality.

d) Educational Interventions

MS should continue to be an active partner in mainstreaming girls' and women's education, along with its strong emphasis on forming women's collectives, to address issues for gender based equality and for women's empowerment. The programme should

provide and steer the mainstreaming of girls' education to promote the second-generation leadership through MSKs.

It should be ensured that girls in Jagjagi Kendras reach the competency of class 5 level in an accelerated learning mode. Teaching- learning processes and assessment methods need to be strengthened in all the educational interventions.

Strategies for scaling up the access of older girls from Jagjagi Kendras to Upper Primary schools need to be developed. Kishori Manch needs to be further strengthened to ensure active participation of all sections of adolescent girls from the community and their linkages with the samoohs.

e) Training and Capacity Building

Intensive capacity building of the MS team is required to undertake the enhanced roles and responsibilities in the new structure under the Xth Plan.

Build specialized training capacities after need assessment exercise at the state, district and block level and develop issues based resource groups of trainers.

The role and activities of the State Resource Centre need to be broadened from merely being a training centre to a knowledge development or learning centre for the entire MS cadre.

Quality control mechanisms need to be put in place for development and dissemination of the training and teaching- learning materials.

Training and teaching learning materials need to be reviewed as per programme needs.

f) Monitoring, Reporting and Documentation

Systematic and concurrent documentation for building the institutional memory of the programme is required. Qualitative and process reporting skills of the state and district teams need to be enhanced for collation and consolidation of the learning and achievements of the programme.

Monitoring mechanisms need to be followed more rigorously in the relatively weaker programme areas.

g) Convergence

Networking with other programmes, organizations and women's groups needs to be strengthened at the state, district and block levels. Clear strategies need to be developed for mainstreaming the MS vision in multiple sectors. The mainstreaming of women on social issues needs to be capitalized, as the society's perception about the programme is not pronounced.

MS should work towards mainstreaming of its learning from the alternative educational programmes with other state initiatives for girls' education.

Conclusion

It is extremely satisfying to put on record that within the given limitations of being a sub-component of a larger education programme MS has achieved so much more in Bihar by giving a very successful and holistic model of women's empowerment. Up scaling the programme's vision and mission while being a part of a larger structure has been a tightrope walk. The journey so far has been successful and enriching because women have been able to carve out their niches at various levels to shed their shackles and give the programme their best. However, MS Bihar has to have its own identity as an empowered autonomous organisation in the immediate future.