

Mahila Samakhya

Uttaranchal

National Evaluation

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Executive Summary

Evaluation Team

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Background

Mahila Samakhya programme was launched in Uttar Pradesh in 1998-89. At that time the district of Tehri Garhwal was one of the many districts where the programme was started. The programme was expanded to Pauri Garhwal in 1995 and to Nainital in 1997. The programme has been expanded to Uttarkashi district in 2004

Even after the formation of the separate State, for the initial two years the programme was managed out of the Mahila Samakhya Uttar Pradesh, which is located in Lucknow. A separate MS society was registered in 2003. A full time State Project Director has been appointed in July 2004 and it is only from August 2004 that Mahila Samakhya has got itself a separate office and state level staff has started to be recruited.

III. Expansion and Reach

Starting with 230 villages in 5 blocks in Tehri Garhwal, the programme has expanded in the state and is now in the four districts of Tehri Garhwal; Pauri Garhwal; Nainital and Uttarkashi and covers 980 villages in 14 blocks.

The expansion now proposed is to cover those blocks that have been identified as socially and educationally backward areas. In Nainital district the two new blocks where the work has started are blocks where Mahila Samakhya will support the ongoing efforts of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan under the National Programme of Education of Girls at the Elementary Level (NPEGEL).

III.1 Effectiveness of expansion strategies:

The approach of the programme has been to implement it in a minimum of 200-250 villages in a district to ensure a critical mass of villages in each district. The expansion of the programme has happened both through formal mechanisms and in informal ways. The four districts where the programme is currently being implemented have the largest number of the blocks where the status of education of girls is poor. In Tehri district all the blocks have been identified under NPEGEL. While for Uttaranchal state the female literacy rates are above the national average but there are pockets especially in remote hill areas where this is still a problem. The state has a wide gender gap in the literacy level. This is a matter of concern and the Mahila Samakya through its programme interventions could narrow these differences.

The Sanghas in their own way play an important role in the expansion of the programme activities. For example: The daughter of a Sangha member, when she got married to another village carried the message of the programme with her.

Sangha women through their informal networks and increased mobility have shared their experiences of support they have received from the programme for fighting the social injustice as well as in becoming financially self reliant. Sangha members who have been office bearers in their groups, have got elected to the Panchayats have been positive role models. It is these leaders of the programme who have given strength to other women to voice issues, collectively address them and continue their efforts to help other women.

The programme teams involvement in addressing issues of social and legal injustice to women in the district irrespective of whether a woman is from a programme village or not has given credibility to them and the programme. With achieving success in some of the high profile cases this has resulted in an increased demand for the programme intervention from non-programme villages.

Expansion of the programme is closely linked to its roll back from villages it has been implemented. An understanding of the roll back process itself has deepened. Initially, it was understood that there would be no further contact with the villages where the programme has withdrawn. Now there is an understanding that resource support will be provided to the federations/ mahasanghas through the small resource group of a JRP and CRPs. Even after the roll back, the villages continue to get all information updates through the newsletters. The Federation or Sangha members are invited for capacity building workshops specifically those pertaining to areas of their interest. Nevertheless there is a need to evolve a clear strategy for such support to sanghas and federations in the future and to clarify the roles of the Junior and cluster resource persons.

IV. Inputs / Strategies at for information dissemination, knowledge building, skill development and creation of alternatives for women and girls empowerment and learning

The essence of the programme has been collective action on issues that affects the lives of women in their families, in the village and at a societal level Whether it is the issue of management of forests, fighting the problems of alcoholism or exerting pressure on the local administration so that those deserving are able to access the benefit of schemes for their development. In some villages the Sangha women apart from addressing issues of education, health and social injustice are also involved with innovative projects like organic farming. Involvement of women in such activities, which also impact the financial status of the family, has improved their status within the village.

The success of these women's groups has resulted in the formation of the Kishori Sanghas – groups of young adolescent girls in the village. The Kishori Sanghas have the potential of a second line of leadership emerging in the villages. Women's groups and Kishori Sanghas in the same villages create a pressure group within the village that is unparalleled.

The strategy of literacy camps, which have given an opportunity to women to read and write, has opened up opportunities of varied nature. The literacy camps have resulted in some of the women taking their education seriously that they have gone ahead with giving class 5 and class 8 exams, irrespective of what age they were.

With their participation in the different activities of the programme like workshops, meetings of Sangha members, exposure visits, interactions with resource persons from outside the district, the women today have the confidence of dealing with any issue any experience that has resulted in an increase in their mobility and enabled them to emerge as opinion makers in their communities.

In order to sustain this momentum, Mahila Samakhya programme has focused its training inputs not only on specific issues raised by the sanghas but have addressed skills of leadership, teambuilding, helping groups understand group management skills.

Apart from conducting workshops for Sangha members the programme has mainstreamed their ideas, discussions on women's issues and sensitized other agencies in the district on gender related issues. In the districts the programme teams on the request of the District administration have conducted gender sensitization workshops for officials of the Nari Niketan, Taxi drivers association, Jail officials and school principals.. Some of the Sangha members have also been involved as trainers for training the Village Education Committee members.

A major concern has, however, been that from the time of bi-furcation there has not been any specific training programmes for the programme personnel. All district teams have asked for their capacity building needs to be addressed with urgency. The district team leaders need training on management skills like team building, planning, they need to be helped with forging links with national and state level resource organizations, academic institutions.

V. Status of Sanghas /Federation

In this section there is a description of the actions undertaken by the Sanghas and the Federations on various fronts.

❖ Education

The Sangha members are highly motivated and committed to the cause of improving the quality of life of girls and women. Education is seen as an important tool in the process of empowerment. During the meetings at the village level women discussed their inability to tackle various problems because they could not read and write. Learning to read and write was one of the first needs that were articulated by the women. The programme arranged literacy classes at the village level. These literacy classes have been very popular among women. Apart from attending literacy camps themselves, women have encouraged other women in the village to attend these classes.

They have started to focus on the education of girls in their families and in their village. Women have supported efforts made by young girls to continue their education. In order to create a supportive environment for the children to continue their education women have also started to intervene in the school system, participating in school enrollment campaigns and retention campaigns.,

The Sangha members have supported children through scholarships to girls who in the event of lack of support would have dropped out of school. The scholarships have covered costs for school uniform, examination fees etc. Recently the Sangha members have also been involved in the monitoring and implementation of the cooked mid-day meal programme. The Sanghas have also been monitoring the teachers and ensuring a conducive learning environment for the children at school, checking teacher absenteeism and intervening when teachers have misbehaved.

Another intervention that has been successfully initiated to support the education of girls and women in the community is the setting up of libraries.. In each district there are a number of libraries functional. The Kishori Sanghas have taken the responsibility of managing the libraries in the village. Young girls in the village largely use these. For the young girls the libraries are a source of information and new ideas.

❖ Support towards NPEGEL

A key strategy under NPEGEL is to ensure participation of community based organizations, teachers and the community in the identification of girls, out of school and sending them to school. Each district team is planning district specific activities to strengthen the efforts to get girls in to schools and ensuring they stay in school until they complete their education. Surveys have been done to identify the out of schoolgirls and

this information has been collated to identify the different reasons for girls to be out of school. This information gathered will enable better targeting of the out of school children and developing appropriate strategies for bringing these girls back to school. The Education Core team members of the Sanghas have conducted these surveys.

The district, block and cluster level resource persons of the Mahila Samakhya are attending the meeting of the education department at their respective level with the district officials, with the BRC coordinators and the teachers meetings at the cluster level.

❖ **Health and Hygiene**

The interventions in the area of health also started with women first addressing issues that directly affected them. The programme organised for their capacity building and awareness on different health related issues. This capacity building process helped them to address their issues along with helping other women in the family or the village. The Sangha women especially the core team members supported the MS programme team in implementing specific health related activities like eye check up camps, implementing the pulse polio programme. The Core team members conducted surveys on identifying health issues affecting women, girls and children.

With increased awareness levels the Sangha members have now been working as pressure groups to ensure quality services through the health delivery systems. Mahila Samakhya has also upgraded the knowledge and skill of dais.

In order to address the poor health of women, it was felt that there was a need to develop an alternative to the existing allopathic system of treatment. These interventions have resulted in an environment where women do not hesitate to talk about their health problems; there are local trained persons who can help them with the diagnosis and treatment. Women who are dispensing herbal medicines have set up nurseries in their small patches of land in their homes where they are growing the herbs. The Sumangla Sanghas have founded Sumangla Sanjeevani Centres where medicines are made and dispensed. These health centres have emerged as a low cost alternative system of delivery of health services to the local community

The beginnings of the Mahila Samakhya programme in the hills started with a discussion on the unequal status of women and the problems of alcoholism. It was through the campaigns against alcoholism that the sanghas began to get strengthened. The groups have also been involved in addressing issues of dowry, rape, child pregnancies, and child labour. In the district of Nainital, Sangha women have formalized the system of addressing issues of violence against women through the formation of an Apni Adalat, that is now gaining in tremendous credibility in the eyes of the local community.

❖ **Participation in Local Governance**

Currently a large number of the Sangha members have stood for elections and are holding office today. In Nainital district within the project area Sangha members today occupy all seats reserved for women. In Pauri district village Deekhet in block Dwarilhal has an all woman Panchayat. This was the first of its kind in the state. In the Duggada block 14 Pradhans, 62 ward members and 2 area Panchayat members are Sangha members.

This large representation of Sangha members into the mainstream system of governance and development is a resource that has immense potential and that Mahila Samakhya has to nurture and strengthen through a targeted programme of capacity building.

❖ **Economic Activities and Environment protection**

While addressing issues of education, health, social problem, participation in local governance, women have voiced the need to improve their economic status. This led to the formation of SHGs and once the group had sufficient funds they started the process of inter-lending, Loans were largely given in cases of health problems, education of children or if a women wanted to start an economic activity at her household level.

In Tehri district, women groups in 50 villages have been linked to a project on organic farming supported through UNDP. The interventions in this project has revived some of the local traditional practices of saving seeds, use of local leaves and other waste to produce organic manure, land restoration and effective techniques of irrigation. Women have started their own kitchen gardens and are also growing vegetables for commercial sale purposes. In Nainital district the programme team has facilitated interaction between the village community and officials of Mother Diary to explore the possibility of selling the vegetable produce of the area to Mother Diary

The Mahila Samakhya programme needs to tread cautiously in addressing livelihood issues. The balance could tilt heavily towards focusing on income generation. This might result in the dilution of activities in the area of education, health and working on social issues, environment –which have resulted in an inter-generational changes

One area where the sanghas women have made a perceptible difference in protecting the forest and have been proactive in ensuring sustainable forest management. In some areas they have worked out the rules and regulation of the use of forest. Punishments and fines were decided; the rules also determined the amount fuel and fodder each family could take. Issues of forest management; which section of the forest is to be used and for how long, plantation of fodder and fuel generating trees and shrubs was now the responsibility of the women.

❖ **Kishori Sanghas**

Another important strategy, which ensures sustainability of the Programme at the family, village level, is the promotion of Kishori Sanghas. Most of the girls are daughters of women who are Sangha members. This has enabled creating a critical mass of empowered women within the family and in the village. Ensuring involvement of their daughters in Kishori Sanghas is also a reflection of the fact that woman would like their

daughters to be educated, be aware of the issues affecting their lives and therefore be part of a process in which their capacities are built to address these problems.

The Kishori Sangha by themselves has become pressure groups on the issues pertaining to adolescent girls in the village. They have addressed issues of harassment/misbehavior by teachers in school, continuing their education if it has been left in between, supporting each other in delaying their age for marriage on sometimes even ensuring their participation in the decision making process of selection of their life partners, taking decisions about their career choices.

VI. Resource Centre

The state office is only recently set up and is in the process of developing an identity for itself in the state. It will need more human resource in order to initiate the process of setting up at the State office. Since the programme in the districts has been ongoing for years, each district has collected catalogued, material, reports and documents. These would be valuable materials to collect and have in one place at the State office and could be the nucleus for conceptualizing the Resource Center

VII. Monitoring /Reporting / Documentation

Each district prepares quarterly reports. There are based on monthly reports prepared by the Sahyoginis. These quarterly reports are then shared with the State office. At the district level there are formats developed for capturing information on the trainings conducted. Participants, funds collected in the SHG, funds given out as loans, loans repaid.

VIII. Organizational Issues

The State office as an independent identity has come into being from July 2004. The SPD has been appointed from July 2004. Apart from a full time SPD the State office had no other full time staff. The finance officer at the State office is also responsible for the financial management for Nainital district. The other secretarial / support staff is either on contract or daily wages.

Similarly in the districts – none of the districts have staff on all approved positions. Uttarkashi where the program has been launched from February 2004 there is one person at the district level. Staff vacancies are a matter of great concern. The programme in the state is at different stages. Where work in the older villages needs to be consolidated federations formed and their capacities are built. Secondly there is a need to work with Sanghas who are not strong enough to be federated but need further strengthening before they mature to be federated. Thirdly the programme is in an expansion mode to new blocks districts, new villages within the same districts. The state office needs to address the issue of recruitment and induction of new staff. The state Government needs to facilitate this action.

In the last two years the district teams have not undergone any further capacity building. They are willing and open to new ideas. They articulated the need for further capacity building. The districts teams need help with developing their capacities in order to be able to fulfill the expectations of the Sanghas. The State Office needs to take a lead in this area and provide visionary leadership.

IX Recommendations

- ❖ From the impact that the Mahila Samakhya programme has achieved in bringing issues related to women center stage in the community, empowered women to address their own issues, it is imperative that similar impact is achieved in other areas of the state. This expansion has to be a well planned exercise. While a decision has been taken to expand into the already identified blocks under the N.P.E.G.E.L, within these areas those specific pockets of villages have to be identified where the problem of illiteracy among women and participation of girls in schools is the lowest. Pockets which have specific issues, social, economic, cultural, that create gender inequities in the society need to be targeted first.
- ❖ In order to do this the expansion has to be informed by data; census data, surveys conducted to assess the socio-economic status of the communities like the BPL survey, health surveys specifically those focusing on issues related to girls and women, apart from this discussions and meetings at the gram sabhas, with community based groups in the area. Specific indicators like female literacy, low enrolment and participation rates of girls at school, poor completion rates at primary, upper primary and secondary level of education for girls, poor health status of women, lack of basic amenities of water, electricity and roads and non-performance of the government structures to deliver basic services of health, education, public distribution, could be considered. Such pockets may be mostly remote areas of a block and with negligible presence of community based organizations.
- ❖ The issues in the Sanghas and the Mahasanghas have come up because these have impacted all women in the village e.g. women realized that because the heavy burden of household chores which included getting water from far away water points or going to the receding forests to collect fuel and fodder took a major portion of their time. Due to this they were unable to attend meetings of the Sangha. The women decided to work on finding alternatives for getting water in the village itself or manage their forests such that they were not only using them but also rejuvenating them with new plantations.
- ❖ Sometimes an incident in the village where a woman was a victim or was suffering from an acute illness became a rallying point for the women. What has been critical is that any issue has first been jointly owned and not left to any

particular member of the Sangha. The women have realized that their strength has been in their being a collective. The issue is discussed at length among group members and only after the entire problem is understood are next steps taken. These discussions help in a complete diagnosis of the problem and the women are able to draw the linkages to focus on the key problem rather than just addressing a particular symptom.

- ❖ The Sanghas are also aware of the fact that sometimes the village community or the Panchayats use their strength to achieve certain gains from the government systems. The women have become aware of this hence during interactions with the government they ensure participation of the elected representatives of the Panchayats in order to generate ownership of the community and not allowing the Panchayats to pass on their responsibilities to others.
- ❖ In the current scenario the Sanghas, the cluster level groups, Mahasanghas and the Mahila Samakya programme team are the four different players. There has to be an exercise of clearly defined roles and responsibilities of each of the players. This is particularly true because within a project area there are Sanghas, which are at varying levels of maturity and ability to address their issues and it is the same for cluster level and block level Sanghas. Perhaps strong Sanghas could be asked to help other weaker Sanghas in the neighbouring areas. It could be the same strategy of strengthening Sanghas at the cluster level. The Mahila Samakya team may be only responsible for the capacity building of Sanghas at the block level. Apart from the capacity building the Sanghas at the block level will need help with developing an agenda separate from the cluster and village level groups. While these groups may have mutually exclusive roles and responsibilities mechanisms of ensuring linkages through representations and co-programming need to be maintained.

After the registration of the federations, these groups need support in building an identity for themselves. These groups would be sustainable if they have an agenda that is related to women at a macro level, representation of women in various groups and committees planning and monitoring government schemes, forums which inform guidelines, schemes to ensure a gender perspective in these.

In the discussions with the members of the Federations it was found that the groups have aspirations to work towards improving the economic status of women in their areas. Currently this is a high priority activity. It has to be a carefully planned activity. The group members have to be made aware of the scale at which such an activity needs to be operational as well as the implications of being involved with larger agencies. The strength of these groups so far has been the process of social mobilization and empowerment. The groups are also aware that in the past village level Sanghas have dissipated because of lack of transparency among the members on funds collected, loans given and repaid. Financial management skills will have to be high on priority for the federation members. Issues like transparency, good

governance of the federation itself and accountability towards all its members will need to be key issues that will need to be planned for.

In order to undertake large projects for improvement of economic status of women in the area the Federations will also need seed funds. Currently the Federations have a membership fee, which marginally supports their operational costs. One of the sources of funds for any economic activity could be loans sought from the Sanghas. This would not only build linkages between the two levels of the groups, it will also create an accountability of the federation towards women's groups closer to the village. This relationship will also keep the Federation linked to the field situations.

- ❖ The strategy of forming core teams on specific issues has resulted in a focused approach to address issues. This has also resulted in simultaneously working in several areas. It has also resulted in a larger number of women interfacing with the government officials, resulting in a larger number of women being recognized both at the community level as well as in the administration. Firstly this system of core teams on certain core issues should be ensured at all level of the Sanghas. Secondly the strategy of distribution of work within the group members and giving equal opportunities to perform and get recognition should be considered as an approach.

In the formation of the core teams the plan should not only address issues of capacity building and addressing the different issues but also one of identifying other members who could be potential next line of leadership. Involving these persons in select activities, providing them exposure through meetings with different levels of officials.

- ❖ In the current scenario government and other agencies have been promoting formation of groups at the village level to implement and monitor different schemes and programmes. Several of these groups have overlap of agenda. The Sanghas formed within the Mahila Samakhya programme need to have clarity on their linkages with these groups. At the village level there has to be an approach, which allows for these groups to complement each other as well as jointly work on common agenda.
- ❖ Groups formed through the processes initiated by the Sahyogini at the village level have been focusing on issues that the women face in their every day lives. These groups have successfully addressed issues by acting as pressure groups, building a consensus and demanding for effective functioning of government departments. The strength of these groups is their in-depth understanding of the issues. These groups have to be helped in maintaining their identity and strength and not get co-opted by any particular department or programme to become their implementation arm. While convergence is desirable co-option should not happen. Groups should be involved in joint planning processes in which they draw up strategies rather than be given a set of activities to be implemented.
- ❖ Each district has immense resource of experiences of addressing the different issues taken by the Sanghas, there is a variety of material which has been used for training,

awareness building. This material is in the form of reports, documentation of training programmes, posters, pamphlets, newsletters, thematic documentation, quarterly reports etc. Each district needs to ensure availability of all these materials at the state office. This could be the starting point for setting up a Resource Centre at the state level. Each district has expertise in specific programme areas, these persons should be asked to undertake placements at the state level in order to support the state office initiated activities.

- ❖ With a large requirement of training and capacity building arising out of the expansion of the programme to two new districts as well as to new villages in the existing districts training modules need to be made available. As mentioned earlier each district has vast amounts of materials available but no standard modules were available. The district teams informed that at the time of a training programme the trainers referred to reports of earlier training programmes. Another important resource available in the districts is the members of the Sanghas and Mahasangha. These women having undergone change themselves would be the best communicators.
- ❖ In the state of Uttranchal, Mahila Samakhya programme has been operational at the field level for the last fourteen years but at the state level the programme is only taking shape now. While the process was initiated in the newly formed state at the time of the registration of a separate society, which took place more than a year after the state was formed. An independent state office has come into place only recently (July 2004). The posting of personnel at the state office and also the filling in of positions in the districts needs to be taken up with urgency.
- ❖ A key area, which has been left un-addressed in the last few years, is the capacity building of the functionaries of Mahila Samakhya programme in the districts and sub-district levels. The capacity building initiatives do not only make the teams aware of newer information, perspectives, they motivate the staff and give them opportunity to share their ideas, experiences and learn from each other. All district teams articulated a need to address this issue immediately. The district teams are keen to build a momentum within the programme, are seeking support from the state level in the form of a visionary leadership. The national office of Mahila Samakhya needs to facilitate some of the training programmes and also support the process of institutionalizing the state office.