

A Study on the Functions and Challenges Faced by the Sahayoginis of Mahila Samakhya to Empower Rural Women of Mysuru District

Dr. H.P. Jyothi

Assistant Professor, Department of Studies in Social Work

University of Mysore, Manasa Gangothri, Mysore, Karnataka, India

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Abstract

Mahila Samakhya is a rural and tribal women empowerment program of the Ministry of Human Resource Development of Government of India. The program was the result of The New Education Policy of 1986. The program believed in the social empowerment of rural and tribal women. The main aim of the program was to facilitate the rural and tribal women to analyse their secondary position in the patriarchy society, make them to realise that they do not have an easy access to and control over resources like education, finance, health, and that they do not have any decision making power in this society. The program believed that to empower women on these lines to need grassroots women workers, who have to live with the rural and tribal women and understand their daily life situations and then facilitate to take off the process of empowerment. This article is based on the secondary data available from the annual reports of Mahila Samakhya, Karnataka. The article has attempted to study the responsibilities of Sahayoginis, a grassroots women workers, the training inputs given to them by Mahila Samakhya, their achievements as Sahayoginis in empowering the rural women of Karnataka and the challenges they faced.

Keywords: Grassroot workers, Sahayoginis, Mahila Samakhya, Empowerment, Rural Women.

Introduction

Mahila Samakhya was conceived to achieve women empowerment of the marginalized women in rural and tribal areas under the light of National Education Policy 1986. The project was implemented in selected states of India on a pilot basis during 1989 and Karnataka was one of the states. Accordingly, a few districts in Karnataka were selected to pilot the project. It is for the first time that Government India, Ministry of Human Resource Development tried to strengthen the rural women through grassroots level women workers. Till then all government programs and NGO programs had grassroots level men workers who used to organize men for the development of the village. In 1986, The New Education Policy visualized the literacy of rural and tribal women as not only achieving reading, writing and numerical abilities but they should be aware of and be conscious of their econdary position in patriarchal society. Mahila Samakhya conceived the concept of Social Development of Rural and Tribal Women.

Since then, the project aimed at mobilizing marginalized women through the grassroots women workers of Mahila Samakhyas known as Sahayoginis who were thoroughly guided, encouraged, mentored and coached by a District Project Unit (DPU) at the district level headed by the District Program Coordinator (DPC). From 1989 to 2003 the grassroots level workers of Mahila Samakhyas were called as Sahayoginis and later they were called as Village Resource Person (VRPs)

Objectives of MSK

1. To create an environment where women can seek knowledge and information and there to empower them to play a positive role in their own development and the development of the community.
2. To set in motion circumstances for the larger participation of women and girls in formal and nonformal education programmes.
3. To enable Mahila sanghas to actively assist and monitor educational activities in the villages, including primary schools, AE, NFE/EGS/AIE centers and facilities for continuing education.
4. To enhance the self-image and self-confidence of women, thereby enabling them to recognize their contribution to the economy as producers and workers, reinforcing their need for participating in educational programs.

Objectives of the Study

1. To study the historical development of the concept of Sahayoginis
2. To study the profile of Sahayoginis
3. To study the role and functions of Sahayoginis in Mahila Samakhyas
4. To understand the achievement of Sahayoginis as a grassroots level worker for the social development of rural women
5. To study the capacity building programs offered by Mahila Samakhyas to empower Sahayoginis

Review of Literature

The Annual Reports of Mahila Samakhyas Karnataka were studied. There are various published

and unpublished reports of Mahila Samakhyas were studied. Events of Mahila Samakhyas Karnataka, Women Empowerment: Approaches and Strategies, Engaging with Empowerment: An Intellectual Journey, Mahila Samakhyas and I T for change, Mahila Samakhyas and UNICEF are some of the literature available on the internet were studied. The Mahila Samakhyas and its Genesis information write up helped to understand the evolution of the program and the role of Sahayoginis.

Research Methodology

The project of Mahila Samakhyas was closed in Mysuru during 2013-14, hence meeting of the grassroots level workers was not possible and hence the article has depended on the secondary sources to gather the information such as Annual Reports published and unpublished and internet sources. The annual reports of Mahila Samakhyas Karnataka published by Mahila Samakhyas, Bengaluru, Karnataka were studied. The interview with a Mahila Samakhyas functionary who worked at Mysuru and Bellary unit during 1996 to 2001 helped the researcher to gather much first-hand information on the functions, achievements and challenges faced by Sahayoginis.

Analysis & Discussion

The Sangha that is the informal group or collective of rural women to meet and discuss their social development facilitated by Sahayoginis. The Sahayoginis were already working in various NGOs were selected as Sahayoginis. In fact, the NGOs working at the grassroots level who were strengthening women sanghas deputed their functionaries as full-time grassroots workers to Mahila Samakhyas, as Mahila Samakhyas happened to be the unique initiative for rural and tribal women empowerment. The deputation of their functionaries was one of the greatest contributions of NGOs working during the 1980's and 90's. The Mysuru district started its function during 1989 in both tribal and rural areas. There were 15 Sahayoginis working in 150 villages in ChamaraJanagara, Periyapattana, Hunsur, Kollegala, H.D.Kote blocks. In North Indian states, they were called as Sakhi. Sahayogini meaning a friend, a guide, an associate for rural

women. Samakhya, a Sanskrit word meaning to be heard. The spirit was that the voice of the voiceless to be heard.

The Specific Responsibilities of the Sahayoginis included the Addressing of the Following Issues in the Women Sanghas

1. The Sahayoginis were expected to perform the role of women's leader,
2. They are expected to extend emotional and institutional support to women.
3. The Sahayoginis were expected to win the confidence of the villagers and men of the family. Otherwise, there was no chance of women sending out by the families. Such obstacles were Darley met by the Sahayoginis. Each Sahayogini was allotted with ten villages where she was responsible for the over all development of Sangha women, as per the program objective Scheduled Caste and marginalized women development was concentrated. Sahayogini was expected to live in the villages.
4. Sahayoginis were expected to explain the importance of literacy for women, creating an environment for learning, gender sensitization, the importance of girls education,
5. Make the women visit the PRI institutions on their own without fear or hesitation, talk about their needs with the officers
6. To encourage the adolescent girls to go to the schools, support and encourage the parents to send their drop out girl children to join the Mahila Shikshana Kendra meant to offer a bridge course and pass out the 7th and 10th standards. Accordingly, in Mysuru approximately 300 girl children have availed this benefit.
7. The Sahayoginis are expected to make the women self confident, be articulate, be spontaneous, to face the authorities, be aware of themselves, physical and social environment and to influence this environment, develop abilities to interact with other people, make them to function as a team and draw individual strength from this, to increase self esteem and respect.

8. Sahayoginis expected to facilitate the women to open child care centers known as Shishuvihara like Anganawadis and they need to appoint one of the sangha women to look after the children below the age of 3. The teacher was trained by Sahayoginis in the learning children songs and stories.
9. The sahayoginis were expected to educate women to participate women in the panchayath elections, attend actively in the Gram Sabhas
10. The sahayoginis were expected to arrange for exposure tours to various states where other State's sahayoginis and their women had created models.

Achievements of Sahayoginis

1. The sahayoginis have successfully achieved the rural women's empowerment which included changed self-image, enhanced access to new information and skills, larger knowledge-based informed choices, organization and collective action, mobilization negotiation and networking.
2. The sahayoginis were successful in mobilizing the youths both boys and girls of the village to start and run Non-Formal Education centers (NFEs) in the villages for the drop outs girls and boys and learn basic reading, writing and numerical abilities.
3. The women were passive in political participation, after the sahayoginis intervention, the women started to contest for panchayath election and around 35 women had strongly come up and worked as elected representatives of Gram Panchayaths in Mysuru district
4. Nari Adaalaths were created in Mysuru district after visiting the Gujarath state where Nari Adaalaths were functioning well. In Nari Adaalaths sangha women were trained to listen to all kinds of problems of women and give suitable solutions and judgments.
5. The Sahayoginis achievement may be well recognized in their facilitation of the discussion to have Sangha Mane, a place of their own to organise meetings and functions of the Sangha. The achievement of Sahayogini

- included in facilitation to decide to have a Sangha Mane, then, go to the panchayath to get the site, meet the engineer to make a blue print, then mobilise funds for construction of the building. The condition was that no men to be involved, everything women have to do. This created a great learning opportunity for women. The men of the village had the great appreciation for Sahayoginis, who made their women 'so intelligent' Mahila Samakhya had contributed Rs.20,000/- and the rest of the funds were mobilised by women. Each Sangha Mane constructed worth of Rs.40,000/- to 60,000/- by women during year 1990 to 2000
6. In fact, the indicators of strong sanghas were recognised only through strong sahayoginis and their works by Mahila Samakhya, that was the central role played by Sahayoginis, who strengthened the women collectives, who developed a perspective on their status concerning them, made women to take initiatives in every aspect right from coming out of their house, learn to talk and move out of the house for exposures visits and PRI institutions to avail the benefits meant for them. With this Sahayoginis were successful in making women feel their active social identity.
 7. After the year 2005, the nomenclature of Sahayogini was changed as Village Resource Persons (VRPs). These VRPs successfully built the networking of women at the and taluka level known as Federations.

Various Capacity Building Programs Offered to Sahayoginis by Mahila Samakhya

To make the sangha women empowered, it was very important to make Sahayoginis empowered first. Otherwise, the program objectives were definite to fail. Hence continuous training programs for Sahayoginis were organised by Mahila Samakhya on the following topics:

1. Issues of Patriarchy
2. Analysis of women position in the society
3. Importance of women education,
4. Importance of girls education,
5. Importance of Health for women, promotion of herbal medicine
6. Decision making at household level
7. What it means for women to have access to and control over resources especially physical, natural and financial.
8. Gender Sensitization
9. Gender Equality
10. Political participation of Women
11. Importance of Networking of Sanghas
12. Street plays on social issues.
13. Organise Mela to make inter district women to gather and discuss their problems, plans and to have a vision document for the next five years.
14. Sahyogini were specially trained in building rapport with the village women, understand them and facilitate to understand themselves.

Challenges Faced by Sahayoginis

1. To convince male members of the families to send their female members to the Sangha activities
2. To convince the village leaders to accept the women development and empowerment.
3. To convince the women to spare evening time to sit and discuss their problems and achieve empowerment.
4. To make women come forward in all fields especially Education and Political.
5. To make women stop illegal liquor shops in the village.
6. The mobility of women from one village to another or Gram Panchayath or Taluka Panchayath or Mysuru district office.
7. To convince women that Mahila Samakhya will withdraw after few years and women have to work on their own.

Recommendations

1. There are other districts in which Samakhya is working and the concept of Sahayogini has to be brought back. And the change of the nomenclature as Village Resource Person is not the friendly word to the rural women \

2. The word Sahayogini convey the meaning of a friend, guide and an associate. Hence the village level workers may be called as Sahayoginis.
3. The federations have to be provided with the help of Sahayoginis by Mahila Samakhya as a handhold strategy for the next minimum three years, without which federations may become weak.
4. Sahayogini Model is worth replication. Other governments and nongovernment programs have to revisit the program and understand the concept of Sahayogini and the way they have to function for women empowerment.
5. Nowadays it is observed that no government or NGO or CSR program has such a committed field level workers working in the rural areas. It is recommended that they can follow this model, which is well tried by Mahila Samakhya and has many success stories for its credit.

Conclusion

As a withdrawal strategy , Mahila Samakhya formed Women Federations in all the seven blocks of Mysuru district and withdrew itself during the year 2013-14 and Mysuru District Project Unit was officially closed. However, the brave works of grassroots level workers of Mahila Samakhya may be seen even today in the 200 villages of all the seven blocks of Mysuru district. The Mahila Samakhya is undoubtedly a program which was in existence in Mysuru district from 1989 to 2013, truly encouraged bottom-up planning, supported the grassroots level workers, that too women workers and has created an exemplary model in the field of Rural Women Empowerment.

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Article

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