

MAHILA SAMAKHYA-ASSAM

NATIONAL EVALUATION

December, 2004

MAIN REPORT

NUEPA DC



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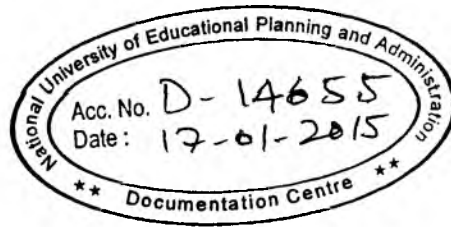
KUNJA MEDHI

KUNTALA DEKA

MALINI GHOSE

MANJULA DOWERAH BIHUYAN

RENUKA MOTIHAR



ABBREVIATIONS

AMSS: ASOM MAHILA SAMATA SOCIETY

MSK: MAHILA SIKSHAN KENDRA

NFE: NON-FORMAL EDUCATION

SPD: STATE PROJECT DIRECTOR

SSA: SARVA SIKSHA ABHIYAN

NGO: NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATION

SHG: SELF HELP GROUP

MS: MAHILA SAMATA/ SAMAKHYA

DRG: DISTRICT RESOURCE GROUP

SRG: STATE RESOURCE GROUP

DIU: DISTRICT IMPLEMENTING UNIT

EDP: ENTREPRENEURIAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

DPEP: DISTRICT PRIMARY EDUCATION PROGRAMME

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I offer my deep gratitude to the Ministry of Human Resource Development for giving me the opportunity to participate in the process of evaluation of Mahila Samakhya, a unique programme for women's empowerment. I am particularly grateful to Kameshwari, for her valued guidance in executing the task.

This evaluation report is an outcome of the joint efforts and contributions of the learned team members of the Evaluation team that had evaluated the Asom Mahila Samata Society in the month of December, 2004, as a part of the National Evaluation of the Mahila Samakhya Programme. Their minute observations, valued comments, pragmatic suggestions and also the evaluation reports form the backbone of the present report. I extend my heartfelt thanks to members of the team for their full co-operation and support in the whole process of evaluation.

The State Project Office of the Asom Mahila Samata Society took all the trouble of managing the logistics during the evaluation work. The Director and her staff untiringly replied to the numerous queries of the members, extended ungrudging help and co-operation in every aspect, looked at the minute details to make the team members comfortable and to enable them to carry out their task smoothly. I take this opportunity to thank the Director and the staff of the AMSS.

The district units and the field level workers were also extremely co-operative and they made the team members, even those who had come from outside the State, feel at home. That had eased the work of the evaluators. I offer my thanks to all of them. But for their co-operation, the evaluation work could not have been done.

Last but not the least my thanks go to Debabani and Diganta of WSRC, GU who had taken the trouble of doing the proof reading and do the final printing job.

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Archana Sharma
Director, i/c, WSRC, GU
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Mahila Samakhya Programme was officially launched in Assam in the year 1995. However, the actual fieldwork for the programme started only in 1997. The rural women of Assam were introduced to the philosophy and vision of MS during the months of June to August 1997. It was started in a few villages in the three districts, Darrang, Dhubri and Morigaon. Awareness programmes comprised the four components, viz., Education, Economics, Health, and Law etc.

The process of Sahayogini selection and the process of group formation also started during this period.

The Mahila Samakhya Programme in Assam functioned in the name and style of Asom Mahila Samata Society (AMSS), registered under the Societies Act- 1860 under the chairpersonship of the Education Commissioner, Government of Assam.

As per the latest statistics available, the AMSS activities are spread over 6 districts, 27 blocks, 190 clusters and 1,556 villages (September, 04). As on October, 2004, there are 1,778 sanghas with 77,233 members, 352 Jagriti Kendras with 20,082 learners. 136 literacy camps were organised where 5,632 learners benefitted. There are 273 Shishu Vikash Kendras and a total number of 11,105 numbers of adolescent girls are covered under 488 Kishory Manchhas. 79 Sangha Kutirs have been constructed. The Sangha women have 651 savings groups and 1,833 Self Help Groups.

A team of 6 members visited three districts under AMSS as a part of the National Evaluation, in December, 2004. This programme has been evaluated by a 6 member team in the month of December, 2004 as a part of the Mahila Samakhya Programme. This evaluation was of revival in implementation for Assam as this was the first national evaluation for the State. For Assam, this is all the more important as this is the first national evaluation for the State.

The major objectives of the evaluation is to assess the AMSS activities with respect to its

1. Expansion & Reach
2. Inputs/ strategies at field level for information dissemination, knowledge building, skill development, and creation of alternatives for women/girls empowerment and learning
3. Status of Sanghas / Federations
4. Resource Centers
5. Inter-linkages / convergence with National/State level programmes & organizations
6. Monitoring, Reporting and Documentation
7. Organizational Issues

The evaluation followed a participatory approach with interactions/discussions with different stakeholders at organisational as well as field level and perusal and review of the strategy plans for various issues, Training plans, modules and materials documentation, reports, newsletters, Plans, budgets, expenditure, audits and MSK/ NFE curriculum.

The actual review process started with a meeting of the Team members at the State Project Office in the afternoon of the 13th December. In that meeting, the terms of reference finalised at the meeting of the Team leaders in the National Office on 6th December 2004 were discussed. Strategies were formulated for the different stages of the evaluation process. Before going for field visits, the team had meetings with the State Education Secretary, who is also the Chairman of the Executive Committee of the AMSS and the SPD SSA had a brief interaction with the Team and also with the director and the staff of the AMSS. The team, divided into three groups had a three-day field visit. A staff member of the State Office accompanied each team.

The itinerary for the field visits was prepared at the State office. However, some minor changes were made at the instance of the team members.

After returning from the field, meetings were held with the AMSS personnel from the districts that were not visited by the team, with the SPD, AMSS and also with the government officials and NGOs associated with the AMSS.

The team members also scrutinised the papers and the publications of the AMSS, collected from the districts and also those available with the State office. The financial and accounting procedure of the AMSS was also discussed.

On completion of the assigned task, the team members finalised the preliminary comments and suggestions and also the modalities of report preparation. The review process ended at that and the AMSS team at the State office were given a feedback on the basis of the preliminary comments and suggestions.

Findings:

It has been observed that the AMSS after, 2002, expanded very rapidly, both in terms of area covered and activities.

Processes of sangha formation in new villages are far less intensive. The inputs/ strategies at field level for information dissemination, knowledge building, skill development etc. also happened to be more or less uniform in all the districts.

Each district has developed internal training capacities to address the needs of the district.

The newly inducted members have not received the type of training and exposure as those who had been working with the MS since its inception MS has undertaken several different activities at the field level. These are primarily under 4 components - health, education, legal issues, and economic development programmes.

The AMSS has been successful in mobilising a large number of village women inspite of the various constraints faced during the process. It was impressive to see women leaders conducting and managing meetings of large numbers of women. It was also encouraging to interact with a group of dedicated sahayoginis who have the type of commitment expected of a missionary. In order to strengthen the programme, the following recommendations have been offered by the evaluation team.

Expansion & Reach:

There should be a clear objective/purpose for expansion and not just expansion for the sake of expansion.

The MS program in the state of Assam should reflect the cultural context of the state and build in innovations to address the needs of the different ethnic groups.

Given the current human resources available one felt that the programme should consider prioritizing consolidation and deepening of on-going processes and move more slowly on expanding.

The programme will also have to strategize on how they can continue to do intensive work in critical areas while expanding at the same time.

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

More intensive training be provided to sahayoginis and the MS staff.

The programme should look into the issue of providing a broad based and in-depth understanding of gender issues to its workers.

The programme should assess the quality of trainings being conducted at different levels (state, district, and village), in terms of content (including conceptual understanding and methodology).

In terms of methodology, more interactive methods which enable participants to express themselves and develop analytic skills could be incorporated.

Working further on the existing training materials is critical given that MS is moving towards functioning as a resource centre.

District units should be encouraged to develop, modify and adapt training materials, modules and determine programme content to reflect local realities, concerns and cultural forms.

Field level programmes:

In the case of EDP activities, there should be different strategies for those women who have a traditional skill. The input provided to them needs to be at the next level of helping with marketing, design, product development and developing entrepreneurship skills. While for other groups who are being taught new skills, the inputs need to be different.

The **EDP** needs also be supported by the information and training on the changed policy decisions that affect these activities.

Under educational activities, there is a need to strengthen the literacy programme in terms of content and pedagogy.

The programme needs to be designed keeping in mind learners' needs and interests and by considering how the women can use literacy skills in their Sangha, Mahasangha and SHG activities.

If the MS wants to take interested women to some stable levels of literacy, which is critical for sangha and mahasangha sustainability and to ensure greater participation of poorer and more marginalized women, then it needs to provide substantive programmatic support (even if they are not providing honorarium).

MS could explore the possibility of running MSKs (short courses) for interested women and developing specific literacy and issue-based curricula for such programmes. A leadership development component could also be included. The MS staff at the district and state will have to develop the necessary skills to design and take forward a creative literacy programme.

There is a need to review the current literacy and education materials and make those more relevant to the MS and Assam context, sensitivity to gender issues should also be included.

Assam being within the seismic belt and also being floods, disaster preparedness against earthquakes and floods needs to be included in awareness programs.

While dealing with the legal issues and fighting for rights, the solution offered needs to be assessed.

The **nari adalats** should be given proper training to equip themselves with the ability to deal with the legal issues.

For popularising the health concepts there is need to use more of the traditional media that is present in Assam. Convergence with other agencies working on health issues is required.

Working with adolescent girls- Kishori Sanghas: The Kishori Sanghas need more regular inputs and the issues covered should be more relevant to their lives. They need to have a program more geared to their needs and shouldn't be overshadowed by the work with women.

The *key issues* are providing health/family life education with a focus on gender sensitisation, reproductive health issues, anatomy, menstruation, preparing for marriage, parenthood, ante natal, post natal care, immunisation, contraceptive services, personality development, issues related to violence and abuse to both adolescent girls and boys. Lessons on nutrition supplementation and education for adolescent girls could also be included.

The second important issue is the need for counselling and health services to unmarried girls and married adolescent couples.

Most of the current programs are focussed on girls but to change societal attitudes, it is also very important to sensitise boys on gender issues.

Resource Centre:

The objectives and target audience of the proposed resource centre need be clearly identified. It is also important to assess the staffing

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Resource Centre:

The objectives and target audience of the proposed resource centre need be clearly identified. It is also important to assess the staffing

requirements for the centre as it shouldn't infringe on the current activities of the AMSS and the current staff time needed to provide technical support and assistance to the district interventions.

The materials prepared at the establishment of a Resource centre will have to be improved both in terms of quality and quantity.

3.5 Inter-linkages/ convergence with National/State level programmes & organizations

MS should be pro active in establishing linkages with various National/State level programmes & organizations both at the State and the District levels. The State Project Office staff and the DIU should be well equipped well trained and strengthen such linkages.

a. Changes at individual and family level

To ensure the positive impact of the MS on the individual and the family level, sanghas needs be strengthened. The sahayoginis role in laying the strong foundation of the sanghas has been crucial and must be recognized.

With regard to SHGs, sanghas and mahasanghas, efforts to increase transparency within the group and ensure a more inclusive decision-making process needs to be undertaken.

There is a need to re-look at the training strategy for core group members and to work with the core groups to develop concrete action plans for the future.

The issue of leadership, both at the sangha and mahasangha level however, needs to be examined more closely.

There should be clarity of the concept and role differentiation between the sangha and mahasangha.

MS should see how it could discuss in constructive way issues of identity and difference within the group.

Along with quantitative indicators, qualitative indicators need to be developed to assess sangha and mahasangha functioning.

MS needs to decide the extent to which they would like to get involved in income generating activities

Monitoring, Reporting and Documentation:

Further inputs in documentation and report writing need to be provided to the staff.

Qualitative improvement should be made in documentation materials. Reviewing the existing materials in other parts of the country on legal, education, health issues and adept translate these to the Assam context.

There needs to be a more systematic and regular evaluation cycle based on a rigorous study design.

There is a need to study what kind of impact the programme has on the women, their families and communities

Organizational Issues:

The National MS office should provide orientation and training to the new Directors of the SPD's in states. There should be ongoing trainings to further develop the skills of the staff members more on issues.

The roles and responsibilities of the MS staff should be clearly stated.

Fund flow to the MS should be regular and there should also be contingency expenses for unforeseen circumstances and emergencies.

There should be a fund within the budget for some innovative initiatives that allow for some flexibility and supports programmes that are culturally relevant and specific for the different ethnic groups, which is the situation in Assam.

Salaries should be given acknowledging experience and seniority.

In conclusion, it can be suggested that the AMSS needs to consolidate existing work and improve its quality before embarking on a scaled expansion, which will give the increase in quantity but may lead to a reduction in quality. This is an empowerment programme and in no way the same as the SHG movement. Care must be taken to protect the identity, concept and the philosophy of MS while it moves further.

SECTION 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background: The Mahila Samakhya programme emerged in response to the National Policy on Education, 1986, which envisaged education as an agent of change in the basic status of women. The programme aims at empowerment of women through creation of a supportive environment and thereby generating a demand for learning. Mahila Samakhya is a centrally sponsored scheme that is funded both by the Government of India as well as the Netherlands Government in the states of Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Uttaranchal, and Assam (funded by DPEP till 2003). Mahila Samakhya is also implemented in the States of Bihar & Jharkhand by DPEP/SSA. The Mahila Samakhya programme is flexible, facilitative and process oriented and not a target driven programme. The programme is guided by a set of non-negotiables i.e allowing women the time and space to come together and influence the shape and pace of the programme; to create a learning environment that encourages critical thinking by women, acquisition of the necessary information and skills to take informed decisions to determine their own development; to develop interventions in response to articulated local needs and demands; and in this process, the role of programme functionaries is to be facilitative and not directive. The Sangha (women's collective) at the village level is the nodal point around which all programme interventions and activities are planned. Over the past few years, sanghas are being federated at the block level in an effort to consolidate lateral and vertical solidarity

The MS programme started in 1988-89 in the states of Karnataka, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh. In 1992 it was extended to the states of Bihar and Andhra Pradesh, in 1995 to Assam and in 1998 to Kerala. With the bifurcation of the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, Mahila Samakhya has been functioning as a separate programme in the states of Jharkhand and Uttaranchal.

Periodic review and monitoring are part of a continuous process undertaken by the respective State programmes. The Dutch funded states (Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Gujarat & Uttar Pradesh (undivided)) have been evaluated as part of the Indo-Dutch Evaluation process. The most recent one concluded in 2001. The states of Bihar, Jharkhand and

Assam (funded by DPEP until 2003) have hitherto been reviewed as part of DPEP/SSA. Bihar and Jharkhand will come under direct MS funding from next year. The last National evaluation was done in 1993.

The National Evaluation of December 2004 is of critical importance as it seeks to review and evaluate the programme in all the 9 states, including Assam that Mahila Samakhya is being implemented in.

1.2 The Task of the National Evaluation Team

1.2.1 The objectives of the evaluation are:

1. To assess the progress of the programme based on the evaluation parameters identified for the National Evaluation of 2004 and the progress made since 2001
2. To critically review programme strategies and interventions in terms of :
 - Expansion
 - Inputs/ strategies at field level for information dissemination, knowledge building, skill development on identified issues
 - Status of sanghas and federations
 - Strategies for training and capability building (both at field and organizational level)
 - The ability of sanghas and federations to function autonomously
 - The impact of the alternative structures such as: non formal educational structures (such as mahila shikshan kendras), forums for redressal of issues of violence (such as nari adalats)
 - MS linkages with mainstream educational programmes
3. To identify constraints and areas that needs strengthening
4. To recommend next steps

1.2.2 Specific Tasks

Given the above objectives the specific task will include but not be limited to evaluation along the parameters identified below:

(i) Expansion & Reach

Assess the progress made in

- Expansion to backward areas/Educationally Backward areas
- Reaching poor and marginalized women
- Assess effectiveness of expansion strategies
- Role of the Sanghas/ federations in the expansion process

(ii) Inputs/ strategies at field level for information dissemination, knowledge building, skill development, and creation of alternatives for women/girls empowerment and learning

- Appropriateness of strategy to address the issue
- Inputs in the form of information/ skills/ knowledge
- Assess training and capacity building plans
- Assess training modules and content (focus not only on information content but more critically on the gender sensitivity of the modules and materials)
- Linkages with mainstream processes
- Effectiveness and impact of alternative structures such as Nari Adalats, Mahila Shikshan Kendras, Health centers, kishori sanghas/ kendras

(iii) Status of Sanghas / Federations

At Sangha level

- Assess impact of the programme in facilitating change at individual and family levels
- Assess awareness and information levels with regard to women's rights, entitlements
- Ability of Sanghas to address social and gender issues and areas where they have been able to make an impact

- Impact of women's mobilization and empowerment on the lives/ education of girls and children and women's own education
- Assess the capabilities of sanghas to function autonomously
- Ability of Sanghas to access and demand accountability of local government structures/ services
- Identify areas where the sanghas require focused inputs and support
- Assess the nature of impact of Sangha federation on the community
- Ability to address women's issues cutting across caste and class divides
- How effective is participation in local governance (panchayats and other structures such as VECs etc)
- Identify areas where the Federations require focused inputs and support

At Federation level

- Assess the processes of federation formation
- Assess the functioning of the federations in terms of institutional processes as well as the agendas addressed by the federations
- Ability of federations to address social and gender issues and areas where they have been able to make an impact
- Assess the capabilities of Federations to function autonomously.
- Ability of federations to access and demand accountability of local government structures/ services
- Assess the nature of impact of federation on the local community
- Ability to address women's issues cutting across caste and class divides

- Identify areas where the Federations require focused inputs and support

(iv) Resource Centers

- Assess modalities and progress made on setting up of State Resource Centers
- Critically examine the work undertaken by the resource centers
- Assess the capabilities of the Resource Centers to provide strategic support to the Sanghas/ federations/ other programmes and organizations

(v) Inter-linkages / convergence with National/State level programmes & organizations

- Critically assess the interface and linkages of MS with mainstream initiatives for women's and girls education (such as Adult Education, NPEGEL, KGBV, SSA)
- Assess the interface and linkages of MS with other initiatives for women & girls (For e.g. related departments of health, Women & Child, Rural Development, etc)
- Assess the nature of partnerships with non-governmental organizations & programmes at different levels
- Identify areas in which MS has been able to impact

(vi) Monitoring, Reporting and Documentation

- Critically assess the review and monitoring processes and mechanisms in place
- Examine how review and monitoring feed back into planning, strategy development & implementation
- Assess the mechanisms for flow of information
- Assess the mechanisms and processes in place for capturing/ documenting organizational memory and learning

(vii) Organizational Issues

- Assess recruitment and induction training processes (at all levels)
- Assess the competency of staff at different levels to implement the programme
- Assess strategies for internal capacity building
- Assess grievance redressal mechanisms
- Assess the processes involved in plan and budget preparation
- Assess to what extent plans and budgets are realistic; and the mechanisms and processes in place for review and monitoring of plan implementation and expenditures
- Examine flow of funds to identify bottlenecks if any
- Assess the capabilities of the programme to go to scale

1.3 Methodology for Evaluation

The suggested methodology for the evaluation was as follows

1. Interactions/ Discussions

❖ Organizational level

- MS staff at State and district level
- NGOs/ organizations MS has been working with
- Education Secretary and SPD SSA
- Interaction with representative of related Departments

❖ Field level

- Sangha women
- Federation members
- Nari Adalats/ Health Centres

- Kishori sanghas members
- Teachers of Non formal centers/ MSK
- Parents
- Panchayat
- Girls studying at the MSK
- Block/ District level officials

2. Perusal and review of the following:

- Strategy plan for addressing various issues
- Training plans, modules and materials
- Documentation, reports, newsletters
- Plans, budgets, expenditure, audits
- MSK/ NFE curriculum

1.4 The Review Process

The actual review process broadly followed the suggested methodology. The process started with a meeting of the Team members at the State Project Office in the afternoon of the 13th December. In that meeting, the terms of reference finalised at the meeting of the Team leaders in the National Office on 6th December 2004 were discussed. Strategies were formulated for the different stages of the evaluation process.

The State Education Secretary, who is also the Chairman of the Executive Committee of the AMSS and the SPD SSA, had a brief interaction with the Team.

After that, the team had a meeting with the director and the staff of the AMSS.

Next morning, i.e., on 14th December, the team was divided into three groups. The three groups left for three different districts. A staff member of the State Office accompanied each team.

The itinerary for the field visits was prepared at the State office. However, some minor changes were made at the instance of the team members.

After returning from the field, on the 17th, a meeting was held with the AMSS personnel from the districts, which were not visited by the team.

On 18th morning, an exclusive meeting was held with the SPD, AMSS followed by a meeting with the government officials and NGOs associated with the AMSS.

In the State office, on the 18th and 19th, the team members also scrutinised the papers and the publications of the AMSS, collected from the districts and also those available with the State office. The financial and accounting procedure of the AMSS was also discussed.

On the 20th the team members finalised the preliminary comments and suggestions and also the modalities of report preparation. The review process ended at that and the AMSS team at the State office were given a feedback on the basis of the preliminary comments and suggestions.

The AMSS team bid farewell to the evaluation team.

(The local team members later interviewed two former SPDs, as they could not be met while all the members were in Guwahati.)

1.5 Profile of the Districts Reviewed

The three districts reviewed have some common features as well as striking differences. The problems of insurgency, immigration and floods are common to all the three districts. In char (riverine) areas, the inhabitants have to migrate from place to place due to floods. Goalpara has a high incidence of witch hunting cases.

Each of the three districts is thickly populated with higher densities of population than that of the State average. It may be noted that the density of population in the State is also higher than the all India average density of population. Dhubri has the highest density of population among the three districts, which is also the second highest in the State.

The rate of growth of population is also the highest in Dhubri followed by Goalpara. Both the districts have much higher rate of growth of population than the State average. Among the districts of Assam, Goalpara has the highest percentage of rural population below poverty line followed by and Dhubri. The sex ratios in each of the three districts are higher than the State average. Total and rural sex ratios are the highest in Goalpara, while urban sex ratio is the highest in Dhubri

Between 1991 and 2001, the child sex ratio has increased considerably in urban Goalpara and urban Darrang, but declined in urban Dhubri. In rural Goalpara, it decreased, while in rural Darrang and rural Dhubri, it increased.

Crude Birth Rates and Total Fertility Rates in each of the three districts are higher than the State average, the highest being in Darrang, followed by Dhubri. On the contrary, the Mean age at Marriage in the three districts is lower than the State average. There has also been an upward movement in the mean age at marriage of those who were married in the period 1986-91 than those married between 1981 and 1986, thereby showing an improvement over time.

Child mortality rates in each of the three districts are higher than the State average, the highest being in Dhubri, followed by Darrang. Child mortality rates happened to be higher among the females in case of Dhubri in the age group 0-1 yr and also marginally higher in Darrang in the age group 0-2 yrs., in other cases the rates are either equal or are against the male child.

All the three districts are below the State average in terms of literacy rates. Dhubri has the lowest literacy rate, followed by Darrang. Wide disparities can be perceived between the rural-urban and also male female literacy rates in each of the three districts.

The overall health infrastructure in the State is poor. The three districts under review are above the State average in terms of a few indicators of health infrastructure. For example, Dhubri with the highest number of hospitals per lakh of population among the three districts is also above the State average. Darrang has more primary health centres and sub-centres per lakh of population than the State average. Goalpara has more hospitals and dispensaries per lakh of population than the State average, but is below the State average on all other counts. The average values of the indicators of course place all the three districts below the state average.

Among the three districts, Dhubri tops the list in terms of the total number of crimes against women, the highest incidence of crime being in the form of cruelty by husband. Darrang tops the list in case of molestation. Goalpara shows a lower rate of crime, but as is mentioned earlier, although witch hunting is frequently reported in the media, there

is no official statistics on such crimes. This form of crime is recorded as murder.

1.6 The Report

The main report of the evaluation of the AMSS presented here is based on the observations made by each of the six-team members including the team leader. The report is divided into four Sections as given below preceded by an Executive Summary. The four Sections are as follows:

Section 1. INTRODUCTION:

The first section, i.e., the present one, gives an introduction of the MS programme and the relevance of the present evaluation process followed by a description of the Task of the National Evaluation Team, the suggested methodology, the review process and the structure of the report. This also includes a few comments regarding the limitations of the evaluation process.

Section 2. In the second section, an overview of the Asom Mahila Samata Society with the main thrusts of the Mahila Samakhya in the 10th Plan is presented.

Section 3. The third Section examines the Progress And Impact Of The Programme with respect to its

1. Expansion & Reach
2. Inputs/ strategies at field level for information dissemination, knowledge building, skill development, and creation of alternatives for women/girls empowerment and learning
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7. Organizational Issues

Section 4. The fourth Section gives the few recommendations made by the team and that concludes the report.

1. Limitations

The team felt that the time allowed for the evaluation was too short for an in-depth assessment. This was more like a rapid review assessment exercise rather than an evaluation. This being the first evaluation for Assam and given the wide coverage of the AMSS in terms of area as well as activities, much more time should have been given for the field visits. The team members were not supplied with reading materials on the program specific to Assam in advance. This was required to prepare more in-depth for the evaluation.

The team members had very little time for discussion among themselves and also with the SPD officials before the field visit. Certain questions emerged during the discussions with the State officials after the field visits. If these meetings were held before the field visit, there would have been better utilisation of the time and the efforts of the team members.

The evaluation visits to the field were structured and didn't allow for an informal interaction or observation of a "normal" program in action. It was also felt that the field visits could have been better planned to enable the team to have an impartial and objective assessment of the process. The evaluators could meet the sangha and mahasangha members only in organised meetings and conventions; there was no scope for informal meetings.

AMSS had also conducted an internal evaluation in the week before the national evaluation. The timing seemed inappropriate as the same districts and villages were evaluated repeatedly in two subsequent weeks. The SPD SSA, who also happened to be the Chairman, Executive Committee of the AMSS interacted with the members of the evaluation team before their departure to the field as Chairman, Executive Committee of the AMSS, but could not give time for interaction later. The SPD, AMSS informed that he considered his first meeting to be sufficient for the purpose.

The team also could not meet the former State Project Directors, during the one-week period of evaluation due to shortage of time. Later on, however, the local team members had the opportunity of having exclusive interviews with two former directors.

In Dhubri, the team could not visit a Mahasangha as by the time they were ready to go there after the other programmes in the field, dusk had fallen. They were debarred to go there for security reasons. That time could not even be utilised for any other evaluation related meeting. The children of the Shishu Vikash Kendras also could not be met because examinations were going on and the children could not come to the Kendra in the afternoon. As the itinerary of the evaluation team was determined at the State office and it did not include an informal meeting with the community or sangha women, no such meeting was possible. This was also difficult, as there were no streetlights at most of the places and the villages where the sangha women stay were quite far from the main town area. On insistence, AMSS state and district personnel accompanying the team took the team in Dhubri to a few households. In Goalpara also, the team could not visit a few remote areas.

The Evaluation team members visited only three districts. For evaluating the activities in the other three districts one had to rely on information provided by the DIUs in the meeting held at the state office only. As such, the present report is based on the comments and observations of the three groups of evaluators visiting only three districts, viz., Darrang, Dhubri and Goalpara. This limits the scope of the present report.

SECTION 2

ASOM MAHILA SAMATA SOCIETY: AN OVERVIEW

The Mahila Samakhya Programme was officially launched in Assam in the year 1995. However, the actual fieldwork for the programme started only in 1997. The rural women of Assam were introduced to the philosophy and vision of MS during the months of June to August, 1997. It was started in a few pockets in the three districts, Darrang, Dhubri and Morigaon, taking 50 villages from each district. Awareness programmes comprised the four components, viz., Education, Economics, Health and Law.

The process of Sahayogini selection and the process of group formation also started during this period.

Since 1996, the Mahila Samakhya Programme in Assam has functioned under the banner of Asom Mahila Samata Society (AMSS), registered under the Societies Act of 1860.

The AMSS had hectic activities during the financial year 1998-99. The rural women were organised with direct intervention of AMSS personnel and gradually, these women acquired the capacity for collective negotiation through the Sangha(s). The AMSS team organised training(s)/workshop(s) for the sangha women for capacity build-up. The various issues put forward by the sangha women were discussed in the DRG meetings and efforts were made to take advantage of different schemes of various departments / organizations for the benefit of the sangha women. The process of networking with various organizations gained a momentum in the year. The training / workshop were designed at different levels village / sangha, cluster, district etc.

In April 1998 the programme was expanded to Sonitpur and in December 1998, Goalpara also came within the purview of the AMSS. Thus at the end of 1998, AMSS encompassed five districts in Assam, viz., Darrang, Dhubri, Morigaon, Sonitpur and Goalpara. Nagaon district was included in the year 2003-04.

In the financial year 1999-2000, AMSS team tried to incorporate withdrawal strategy with the activities of the Sangha women. In case of Goalpara district, it was incorporated with the programme launching process itself. Hence, in this financial year, AMSS team gave equal emphasis on both the sangha level and cluster level

approach. The core-groups were formed in the sanghas. The whole process led to the emergence of the federating structure.

In 2000-2001, AMSS team had to prepare strategic intervention at cluster level to face the financial constraints and to incorporate the demand of the sanghas. This approach reflected in the activities of the sangha women in developing a strong relationship among the sanghas within the cluster. On many occasions, the sangha women showed their strength and voluntary spirit and even organised cluster level programmes at their own cost. As a result, the cluster level meetings became regular in almost all the clusters and the process of federation strengthened in many clusters.

In the financial year 2001-2002, the financial constraint continued. The activities of the AMSS however did not stop. The AMSS team worked for strengthening the cluster level platform of the sanghas. Sharing between adjacent clusters was a remarkable effort of the sanghas. The AMSS team also emphasized on the documentation of the sanghas. The sahayoginies were encouraged to prepare cluster level annual report in co-ordination with the sangha women. The federation structures were encouraged to prepare their bye-laws and simultaneously each sangha was encouraged to prepare bye-law in a systematic manner. To strengthen networking with various organizations also the AMSS team laid more stress on documentation.

In the financial year, 2002-03, the process of strengthening the federation structure continued. Training programme(s) had been organized more systematically. Training modules have been developed by the MS personnel and also with the help of experts from outside.

To strengthen as well as to decentralize the programme, this year more programmes were organized at federation level rather than at DIU level. Efforts were made also to strengthen ties with the grassroot level organisations.

In the year 2003-04 after June'03 the Programme was included in central scheme. The fund flow had been regularized. Consequently, AMSS activities also geared up.

Each programme had been designed in the perspective of 10th plan of MS.

During this year AMSS organised TOT to develop component wise resource group at all levels.

The AMSS activities were focused to initiate Block federation, which was limited to Panchayat or Cluster federation. In this connection block level sharing has been started in strong areas.

During the financial year 2004-05 AMSS has been giving stress to develop Resource Centre at both State & District levels. In order to develop Block resource centre, Block resource groups have been formed.

TOT for resource groups for all components has been completed.

This year the AMSS has started childcare centers, named as "Omala Kendra" in each AMSS district upto December. On 6th December 2004, 120 Nos. of 'Omala Kendra' have been started. Induction Training for 10 days were organised for all the workers of Omala Kendra.

The collective effort of the sangha women to remove literacy from among themselves emerged into the formation of some centers were spontaneously around different sanghas of each AMSS districts. Such centers are named as "Jagrity Kendra" and the instructress of such kendras is called "Gayatri".

For ensuring better opportunities to the children the sangha women had taken initiatives to start Sishu Vikas Kendra (SVK). SVK provides access to school going, not going and drop out children. Anganwadi Centres cover children upto the age group of 5 and beyond 6 years children is supposed to go to the formal school. A good number of children in this age group also remain out of school. The SVKs are working with children in this age group.

The AMSS has also started working with adolescent girls through the formation of "Kishori Manch"(s) to provide them a collective platform to stand against their obstacles that come in their life.

Presently almost all sanghas have small savings. To avail the benefit from different government schemes the sanghas members are also forming 2-3 SHGs under one Sangha.

As per the latest statistics available, the AMSS activities are spread over 6 districts, 27 blocks, 190 clusters and 1,556 villages (September, 04). As on October, 2004, there are 1,778 sanghas with 77,233 members, 352 Jagriti Kendras with 20,082 learners. 136 literacy camps were organised where 5,632 learners benefitted. There are 273 Shishu Vikash Kendras and a total number of 11,105 numbers of adolescent girls are covered under 488 Kishori Manchis. 79 Sangha Kutirs have been constructed. The sangha women have 651 savings groups and 1,833 Self Help Groups.

SECTION 3 THE MAHILA SAMAKHYA IN THE 10TH PLAN

Under the Xth Plan strategic shifts have been proposed in the Mahila samakhya Programme to take into account the growing maturity of the sanghas that the programme works with. The focus is on enabling the autonomous functioning of the sanghas and emerging federations. In the process the programme role especially in older areas is moving in the direction of providing resource support to sanghas and federations. At the same time, the MS programme is poised to play a critical role in the context of the more intensive intervention of the government in girls' education.

The suggested changes in the tenth plan are:

1. Critical Coverage is minimum of 250 villages in each district.
2. New Expansion to educationally backward blocks and
3. New Districts while taking up new districts, to start with 100 villages and expand to 250 villages.
4. Structural Changes in older Areas: For structural changes, the requirements are:
 - i. Withdrawal of Sahayoginis within two years and
 - ii. Setting up of block unit with one Junior Resource Person and two Cluster Resource Persons.
5. Structural Change in New Expansion Areas:
 - i. Withdrawal of Sahayogini after 5 years and shift to a block structure.
6. Strengthening of federations: The expectations are :
 - i. Role in co-ordination and monitoring of Mahila Sikshan Kendras, Nari Adalats, Kishory Sanghas etc.
 - ii. Exit strategy of MS.
 - iii. MS to provide training, capacity building and resource support.
7. Dissemination of MSS perspective, strategies and resource support to other sectors.

It is expected that the pool of trainers will be expanded to include sangha women and MS personnel.
8. Setting up of Resource Centre at State level to meet increasing demand for MS inputs and concretize MS

SECTION 4 PROGRESS AND IMPACT OF THE PROGRAMME

4.1 Expansion & Reach

The trend in the year wise expansion shows that, the number of districts and blocks increased from 3 in 1997 to 6 and 27 respectively in 2004, the number of cluster/panchayats increased from 18 to 190 and the number of villages from 150 to 1,556, a ten time increase. This shows that it has crossed the critical minimum suggested in the tenth plan. In the initial years, the rate of increase was moderate. This pace continued till 2000. Between 2000 and 2002, there was stagnancy. After, 2002, the programme expanded very rapidly, both in terms of area covered and in terms of activities.

This trend was observed in all the three districts reviewed.

The AMSS adopted the following criteria for selecting the first 50 villages

- Low female literacy rate.
- Flood free and disturb free area.
(For ensuring accessibility in all the seasons so that team can have experience throughout the Year)
- Contiguous Villages were selected.

In the 2nd phase of expansion of villages within the existing districts there was a marginal change in the criteria for selecting the villages. The focus was on

- Low female literacy areas (Block)
- Marginalized women
- More remote areas and
- Expansion through ripple affect

In Goalpara, the villages having water, health and sanitation problems were also selected.

In the first phase, sufficient time was devoted for sangha mobilization. It went through a number of steps starting with detailed discussion on the concept of Sangha. The MS personnel particularly the Sahayoginis were constantly involved in the process.

In Goalpara, the programme activities initially were started without the sahayoginis, the resource persons were involved in the field activities. But later on, due to pressure from within the system, sahayoginis had to be engaged.

In the second phase, a much quicker approach has been followed. The women of the older sanghas and mahasanghas have been involved in the expansion process. For facilitating this process, sanghas have been classified as strong, medium and weak, the strong sanghas being accepted as having the capability of involving themselves in the expansion process.

Another approach which requires very little involvement of the MS has also been followed. Being motivated by the MS activities, some vilages come forward on their own to form sanghas, that adds to the number of sanghas under the AMSS. This expansion process is termed as the ripple effect and has been identified by the MS team as one of their “successes”

With regard to the expansion and reach of the AMSS, a few critical observations emerged. Viz.,

The expansion strategy seemed to be more fund driven than planned. Of late, the fulfillment of the tenth plan targets seemed to have influenced all the AMSS activities.

While expanding to new areas and taking up programmes among new groups/communities, the MS does not seem to have weighed its strengths and weaknesses. In Dhubri, for example, the MS has expanded to the villages in the *Char* areas that primarily consist of migrants from Bangladesh with low literacy, poverty and other social indicators. However, as the population is mobile given the regular floods in the area, it is very difficult to conduct any sustained interventions in the Char areas. The demographic composition of the district has also changed considerably over the last few years given the high migration from Bangladesh. A question that arises is that because of focus on these migrant populations, there may be neglect on the other indigenous tribal populations of Assam, who maybe better on literacy and health indicators but are also poor and need interventions. Therefore, the criteria for

selection of areas/villages need to be thought through carefully. The same type of rapid expansion has been observed even in the other districts. There should be a clear objective/purpose for expansion and not just expansion for the sake of expansion.

The expansion strategy reflects a major shift from the earlier process oriented approach to the newer emphasis on attaining targets. Processes of sangha formation in new villages are far less intensive. The implications of such a paradigm shift in the process needs to be considered, the mobilization of women in the older sanghas is the strength of the programme, it is this foundation that has allowed the programme to continue through difficult periods. Moreover, one needs to recognize that the push for expansion has come at a time when the programme is at a critical juncture. In the older villages the immediate need is of consolidation and deepening of processes (within sanghas and mahasanghas), building issue based expertise (which requires specialization), and developing capacities at different levels to ensure sustainability of the sanghas and mahasanghas. Given the current human resources available one felt that the programme should consider prioritizing consolidation and deepening of on-going processes and move more slowly on expanding. The programme will also have to strategize on how they can continue to do intensive work in critical areas while expanding at the same time.

4.2 Inputs/ strategies at field level for information dissemination, knowledge building, skill development, and creation of alternatives for women/girls empowerment and learning

As in the case of the expansion strategy, the inputs/ strategies at field level for information dissemination, knowledge building, skill development etc. also happened to be more or less uniform in all the districts.

Each district has developed internal training capacities to address the needs of the district. However, the newly inducted members have not received the type of training and exposure as those who had been working with the MS since its inception. Sahayoginis and DIU staffs have not been through any rigorous gender training. Their understanding of gender issues has been through the trainings they have received for

specific components (e.g. health, education or sangha formation). While this is necessary, it cannot be instead of developing a broad based and in-depth understanding of gender issues. The programme should look into this issue.

Training gaps have been observed also in the case of the new sanghas and mahasanghas. The older sanghas seemed more “mature” and articulate, more capable of speaking out especially on rights issues while the younger sanghas appeared to need more hand-holding and support. The Sahayoginis in general appeared to be quite strong, dynamic and committed despite the various obstacles that they seemed to have faced at various levels. Therefore, the question that arises is that with the sahyoginis being phased out what will be the support structure for the newer sanghas who seem to need much hand-holding and support before they can “graduate” to being independent and on their own.

Over the years several trainings on different issues have been conducted at different levels. Initially inputs from the national office and external resource persons familiar with MS were provided to train sahayoginis, state and DIU staff. Gradually training skills have been developed within the programme and are drawn from within the state. Building internal capacities is an important development. The programme is now at a stage when it should assess the quality of trainings being conducted at different levels (state, district, and village), in terms of content (including conceptual understanding and methodology). From the discussions we had at different levels, we were left with the impression that trainings focus more on information dissemination, modalities of implementing programmes and less on perspective building and building skills of critical reflection. For example, in the EDP trainings and programme, the focus has been on providing vocational skills. While this is undoubtedly important (and is a demand being made by the women) the trainings could also include building a broader understanding of markets or the impact of globalization processes. Similarly, the paradigm for the health inputs could be expanded beyond awareness on hygiene, messages on adopting small family norms and the need for good nutrition, to understanding for instance, the links between women's status and health, critically analysing the public health care system and the impact of health policies on women. In terms of methodology, more interactive methods

which enable participants to express themselves and develop analytic skills could be incorporated.

At present the training modules available are more like a listing of topics and should be elaborated further. Working further on the existing training materials is critical given that MS is moving towards functioning as a resource centre. The programme will benefit from greater interaction with other trainers and exposure to other approaches to training (on gender and other issues). Several persons commented that this was a role that the National Office had played earlier and should once again facilitate such inputs and exchanges.

Sangha women are being trained as resource persons, which is a good move and necessary to meet the growing needs of the programme. We were informed that some sangha women had acted as resource persons to other programmes and their approach and skills had been appreciated.

Field level programmes

MS has undertaken several different activities at the field level. These are primarily under 4 components - health, education, legal issues, and economic development programmes. In addition, work on social and gender issues have also been reported in Darrang district. In each district, the responsibility of the DIU staff is divided by components and also by blocks.

EDP: Under EDP, a wide variety of activities have been taken up by the sangha women. The quality of the EDP program seems variable and there needs to be a clear understanding of the purpose of the EDP. Is it to provide vocational training and skill building? Is it to help with income generation/livelihoods? Is it to create savings groups and provide linkages to loans etc? There needs to be more conceptual clarity. MS has been working with different tribes and communities. Some of them are traditionally skilled weavers. They can make products of very high quality for their own consumption and the local market with bright colours and designs. On the other hand, some are to be taught the ABC of these skills. There should be different strategies for those women who have a traditional skill. The input provided to them needs to be at the next level of helping with marketing, design, product development and developing entrepreneurship skills. While for other groups who are being taught new skills, the inputs need to be different. The number of EDP

activities were also many including poultry, mushroom cultivation, dairy, etc. Their need to be separate specific inputs provided on EDP if that is the thrust of the program.

The EDP needs also to be supported by the information and training on the changed policy decisions that affect these activities.

Education: under the education component, the MS is conducting literacy programmes. At all the sangha meetings women talked about the importance of literacy. In each district, not only the MS staff but also the sangha women proudly narrated stories of how the MS could teach them the value of education and could convert many illiterate women to literates even overnight.

In all the three districts, MS has been running literacy centres (Jagriti Kendras) for some time. Jagriti Kendras have evolved as an outcome of the literacy programmes of the MS. The sangha women, having realised the importance of education, attempted to remove illiteracy from among themselves by utilising the services of the literate women within the sangha. Thus, they voluntarily selected one or a group of 3-4 literate women from among the sangha members and started literacy centres. These centres were termed as Jagriti Kendra, the instructress (es) being titled as 'Gayatri'. These centres are run by volunteer teachers and are monitored by the sanghas and mahasanghas. In terms of numbers, MS runs a large number of JKs and have made a number of women literate. However, these numbers may not reflect the real status of these centres nor the actual literacy levels attained. The figures also show that a number of JKs have closed. A reason for this is that the literacy programme has run largely on an informal and ad hoc basis, with little supervision and inputs. Until recently no literacy primer or specific methodology was being followed. Volunteers taught according to their own methods. Recently, MS at the state level has linked up with the State Literacy Mission (SLMA) and is now using their primers. They have also now trained MS on how to use these primers. This has made the programme a little more systematic. However, MS has been using these primers without scanning them or seeing how they can modify to make them more interesting and gender sensitive. The principle of using existing material (rather than re-inventing the wheel) is a very sound one but material should be used after reviewing.

Despite the limitations the women still appeared enthusiastic about literacy. There is a need to strengthen the literacy programme in terms of content and pedagogy. The programme needs to be designed keeping in mind learners' needs and interests and by considering how the women can use literacy skills in their sangha, mahasangha and SHG activities. At the Jagriti Kendras no material other than these primers are being used. The State office mentioned that case studies have been developed but these were not mentioned at the field level. There is no material available that caters to the requirements of newly literate readers. The programme should develop this urgently.

It is impressive that volunteers are running the literacy programme and that it is being monitored by the sanghas. The sanghas see this role as important. But there are also certain limitations in this approach. For one, classes are often not regular and being a volunteer programme MS cannot insist beyond a point. Secondly, while sanghas can monitor the kendras to ensure that they are running and that women attend, they are not equipped to monitor the quality of the classroom interactions. (similar problems were observed with the SVKs). MS needs to see where it wants to take the literacy programme. If it wants to take interested women to some stable levels of literacy, which is critical for sangha and mahasangha sustainability and to ensure greater participation of poorer and more marginalized women, then it needs to provide substantive programmatic support (even if they are not providing honorarium). At present the kendras did not have blackboards or teaching aids.

MS has also been running literacy camps. Through discussions it became clear that the camps were effective in providing an intensive burst of literacy (apparently the literacy attainment levels have gone up through this strategy), which is then followed up through the kendras. The potential of literacy camps (and provision of intensive literacy inputs) should be further strengthened and explored. The MSKs being planned are only going to cater to adolescent girls. MS could explore the possibility of running MSKs (short courses) for interested women and developing specific literacy and issue based curricula for such programmes. A leadership development component could also be included. The MS staff

at the district and state will have to develop the necessary skills to design and take forward a creative literacy programme.

The other area of concern is regarding convergence with the government's literacy programme. We were told that after the Total Literacy programme, the post-literacy and continuing education programme have not taken off in Assam, except in a few blocks. Given that MS has no specific allocations for adult literacy, MS at the state level should lobby to see that these programmes are initiated in the districts where they are working and strategize on how they can work with these programmes.

There is a need to review the current literacy and education materials and make those more relevant to the MS and Assam context. Sensitivity to gender issues should also be included.

Given Assam's vulnerability to floods and earthquakes disaster preparedness against earthquakes and floods needs to be included in awareness programs.

Legal: Nari adalats are generally fighting for issues related to marital discord, rape etc. In Goalpara the Nari adalats have successfully rescued a few victims of Witch hunting.

In Dhubri, it has been highlighted that they have been able to intervene successfully in a few very delicate issues like 'talaq' also. Other issues of intervention were listed as stopping second marriages, settlement of family disputes, rape cases, child marriage, dowry related cases, liquor menace and gambling.

However, it could not be ascertained whether these issues were also brought to the notice of district administration and what is their role in such cases. It was however mentioned that in some cases, the police transfer the responsibility to the nari adalats.

While dealing with these legal issues and fighting for rights the solution offered needs to be assessed.

The nari adalats also seem to have very limited information on issues like personal laws, laws relating to property rights etc.

Health: The health component is basically confined to the RCH issues and home hygiene. For popularising the health concepts there is need to use more of the traditional media that is present in Assam. Convergence with other agencies working on health issues is required.

Working with adolescent girls- Kishori Sanghas: The Kishori Sanghas have been formed sometime in the early part of 2004. Interviews with a few kishori sangha members highlighted the need for more continuous and sustained efforts. A two-day training in the beginning and then the sanghas being left alone to fend for themselves is not an adequate strategy. They need more regular inputs and the issues covered should be more relevant to their lives. They need to have a program more geared to their needs and shouldn't be overshadowed by the work with women.

The *lessons learned* from adolescent programs in other parts of the country have shown

- a) the importance of community involvement and ownership for the success and sustainability of any program especially reproductive health focussed program targetting adolescents especially girls. A successful strategy has been involving the community, *mahila mandals*, teachers, *panchayat* leaders and parents right from the beginning of any program. The involvement of women and community members has been the key to negotiating the successful participation of girls in programmes.
- b) another successful strategy has been the involvement of adolescents from program planning and implementation through its continuous development to suit the changing needs of the target population.
- c) linkages with existing networks and structures are especially useful in sustaining the programs, by building support and reducing cost.
- d) adolescent health education camps have been a cost-effective and efficient strategy in reaching a large population of school drop out adolescents in a short time-span but there is a need for regular and systematic follow-up.
- e) Self-help groups have been a useful way to provide support and follow-up to programs.
- f) An integrated approach has also been successful in some cases, i.e., linking up non-formal education, vocational skills/income generation activities with family life education and health services. The

vocational skill component has been the “entry point” and “magnet” for the parents to allow the out of school daughters to attend the programs.

The *key issues*, therefore, are providing health/family life education with a focus on gender sensitisation, reproductive health issues, anatomy, menstruation, preparing for marriage, parenthood, ante natal, post natal care, immunisation, contraceptive services, personality development, issues related to violence and abuse to both adolescent girls and boys. Also included could be nutrition supplementation and education for adolescent girls.

The second important issue is the need for counselling and health services to unmarried girls and married adolescent couples. Most of the current programs are focussed on girls but to change societal attitudes, it is very important to also sensitise boys on gender issues.

In overall terms, one felt that the structure and content of programmes being provided are centrally determined. Given that all the districts are so varied we need to ask the question - how is the content of trainings and programmes of one district different from the other districts? Similarly, even within a district, MS is working with diverse groups who have different needs and cultural forms etc. Some space should be made to enable these to be reflected. For example, in a Bodo village the JKs are teaching in Bodo language but the primer being circulated by the MS programme is in Assamese. The volunteer, who had studied in Bodo, said she had difficulties in writing reports and accessing MS material. At present there is a 'one size fits all' approach that is being followed. Given the vast experience now gathered at district levels, district units should be encouraged to develop, modify and adapt training material, modules and determine programme content to reflect local realities, concerns and cultural forms.

The fact that MS runs many different activities has meant that it is able to address a variety of issues of importance to women. However, the flip side of this is that given the scale of the programme, the human resources and capacities available, MS is unable to explore any

of the issues in any degree of depth. Within each of the components mentioned above, MS implements several activities. For example - MS runs Mothers Groups, literacy centres, literacy camps, Shishu Vikas Kendras and student parliaments (in schools). It has recently started early childcare centres also. In some districts it runs residential Balika kendras (Residential Bridge Courses) and has plans to start MSKs. At the district and state level resource persons have multiple responsibilities. (For example, at the state level each resource person handles upto 5 components, in addition to having responsibilities of specific districts). As the programme grows there are pressures from within and outside to take on more activities. Sustaining activities requires that the cycle of visualizing, implementing, skill building and reflecting happen on an on-going basis. At present MS is hard pressed to do this. For instance, though MSKs are to begin quite shortly, the programme has not yet been able to do preparatory work like designing curricula and materials or planning on the design for teachers training. MS needs to consider whether it is spreading itself too thin and strategize on how it can capitalize on its existing strengths.

4.3 Resource Center

AMSS is planning to start a resource centre. However, the objectives and target audience of the resource centre need to be clearly thought through. Currently, there does not seem to be a clear understanding of the role of the resource center. It is also important to assess the staffing requirements for the centre as it shouldn't infringe on the current activities of the AMSS and the current staff time needed to provide technical support and assistance to the district interventions. The materials prepared aiming at the establishment of a Resource centre also are not adequate both in terms of quality and quantity.

4.4 Inter-linkages / convergence with National/State level programmes & organizations

Being a part of DPEP the MS programme has been guided by the objectives and guidelines of these programmes. MS at the district level has implemented some components of the programmes like that of RBC,

LTBC are the out come of such collaboration of mothers groups, While MS has played an important role in implementing and supporting these programmes, the impact of MS's philosophy and approach on these programmes in general is far less visible.

MS in each district has periodically linked up with various government departments. For example, in Darrang district the MS had collaborated with the concerned govt. department in the area of vocational training. As vocational training is an important demand such linkages are important. They have also collaborated with the block administration and NABARD, who have provided training on management of SHGs. Recently representatives of the district adult education department have come as resource persons for their literacy volunteer training. The DIU has organized most of these collaborations. However, recently efforts are being made to equip sahayoginis and sangha leaders to make these linkages. In Goalpar, linkage with the government department seemed to be quite good as was reflected in the DRG meeting. During the meeting with DRG members one got the impression that while MS may not have a very visible profile it was recognized as a solid field-level women's programme. Several of the DRG members commented on the commitment and skills of the sahayoginis.

In Dhubri, the MS has benefited from government programmes with regard to training for fisheries, road construction etc. in a number of occasions at the field level. At the district level however, the MS seemed to have very low visibility. The meeting with the DRG members in Dhubri gave a discouraging picture. Majority of the DRG members being ex-officio members representing different government departments were not present in earlier meetings in person. Even those members who were personally present earlier did not seem to have much knowledge and information about the MS philosophy and its activities in the district. In the meeting with sahayoginis, the unfriendly attitude of some government departments and also bankers were highlighted. To deal with such issues a strong and effective leadership is required.

a. Changes at individual and family level

In every district, the evaluation team members were greeted with a great deal of enthusiasm at all the village level meetings. The women were keen to interact with the team members also the MS staff that accompanied the team unanimously said that the MS programme had brought far-reaching changes in their lives. The most commonly mentioned changes were:

Mobility - Women across the board said that the MS programme had brought them out of their homes. Earlier they could never dream of leaving their homes to attend a meeting. This public space that has been created is visible and greatly valued by the women. With the formation of mahasanghas, women's horizons have further expanded. Women now travel to different villages to attend meetings. Mobility was seen not only in physical terms but also with regard to growing abilities to take on different roles. For instance, women see their ability to participate in committees like the mothers groups as an important achievement.

Self-confidence - Women spoke about overcoming shyness and being able to 'speak out'. In several villages women commented that earlier they would never did not have the confidence to speak to strangers. Now they can speak fearlessly even to men. In fact government officials now seek out sangha women when they visit the village.

Awareness - Women repeatedly mentioned that the MS programme had provided them with information they previously never had. They concretely mentioned having got information in the following areas:

- Information on the need to educate ones children
- Awareness regarding cleanliness and hygiene (both personal and cleanliness of the village)
- Awareness about how to conduct oneself at a meeting and how to conduct meetings
- Awareness about the need to adopt family planning measures
- Awareness about the problems of early marriage and polygamy

Literacy: Several women said that after the MS programme began they have been motivated to become literate. They valued the fact that they could now write their own names, names of their family members and the

village. They also mentioned that this had helped them with their children's education. Above all, even rudimentary literacy has helped build their self-esteem and confidence.

Decision Making: They have also been able to create a space within the family. Now they have a say in household decision making. They have been able to motivate the menfolk to respect their individuality. The sangha women said that some of them faced problems at home while coming out to sangha meetings earlier, now the family members do not object to their public activities. Rather they help them to find out time for these meetings.

Not only at the family level, but they have been also able to act as a pressure group in changing policy decisions at the public sphere.

b.Sanghas

The strength of the MS has been its ability to mobilize and organize large numbers of women. The large numbers (in some villages over 80) makes the sangha very visible at the village level. The sanghas cut across caste and class lines. It was reported that initially women belonging to different castes and religions did not like sitting and eating together. However, that has changed now and women intermingle quite freely. MS also works quite actively with the Muslim and tribal communities. Being able to bring together such large numbers of women in difficult economic and political circumstances is an important achievement of the MS programme and reflects the high degree of trust the women have in the programme. The women see MS as being very different from other Government programmes. The sahayoginis role in laying this strong foundation has been crucial and must be recognized. They are in fact the backbone of the programme.

- The sangha women had made some very successful interventions in a number of cases. For example:

The sangha members in Dhubri who happened to be working as wage labourers in the agricultural sector as well as brick kilns and other factories collectively fought for equal wages for equal work and removal

of gender disparity in the wage structure. They succeeded in their effort and now both male and female labourers get equal wages.

The muslim women members of the sanghas defied their religious dictum that a woman taking birth control devices will be deprived of the right to 'Jānājā', funeral according to religious customs. They not only adopted family planning devices but could motivate some men also to adopt birth control measures.

The sangha women had been able to ameliorate the liquor problem and gambling to a great extent although they feel this is the greatest challenge for them. They have made some rules against drunkards and gamblers to which no one in the village oppose, rather, many of them lend the women their help in implementing these rules.

The sahayoginis have attracted the attention of the people so much that some of them are also engaged as VDPs

They had also been able to question the right to talaq (divorce) and could successfully solve a few such problems. They could stop a few second marriages as well. This issue was common also to Darrang.

In Goalpara, sangha women of the Rabha Community in Badahpura Gaon Panchayat challenged the customary law, which deprived a widow without a son to inherit the husband's property. Their collective intervention compelled the community to change that customary law and now such widows are also inheriting the property of her late husband. This must be noted as an extraordinary achievement for the tribal communities regard their customary laws as sacrosanct that needs be preserved.

In Goalpara, another successful intervention is through the environment related issues. The MS workers created awareness among the sangha women about the herbal medicines and encouraged plantation of herbal medicinal plants with the help of the social forestry department. Sangha women could also stop the practice of making charcoal by cutting big trees.

The most encouraging aspect of the MS programme is the enthusiasms with which the sangha women speak. The team spirit that is visible at all levels of the MS is also another noteworthy feature. However, unconfirmed reports regarding internal conflict in some districts were also received.

At all the meetings women were eager to enumerate the work they had done. The most commonly mentioned areas were:

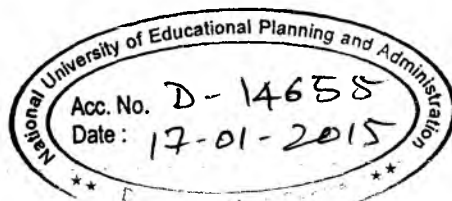
- Formation of mothers groups, which women feel have helped them understand the importance of education for their children, and have linked them to the school system.
- Tree planting and erecting fences (around the school building, Mahila Kutir or temple).
- Undertaking drives to clean the village and school.
- The three common social issues that have been taken up have been to try and stop alcoholism (some examples where women have closed alcohol vends were shared); stopping child marriage and polygamy (some cases regarding this were shared).

Several sanghas have undertaken collective activities (like collective farming or fishing) to generate income for the sangha fund. Such activities have brought women together, helped create an identity and strengthened ties within the sangha. Women took pride in showing their collective farms and the Mahila Kutirs that have been built collectively. In the examples shared, women said they had taken over unused village land or village pond (on an informal basis) and contributed their labour to make it cultivable (or usable for fishing purposes). Those who are unable to contribute their labour have to contribute monetarily. The money earned through such activities is used either for collective purposes (for example to celebrate events like Children's Day or to give small loans to women). However, there was confusion amongst the members when asked to explain how decisions on how to spend the money are taken, and the details of the income and expenditure of these accounts were known mainly by the leaders. Efforts to increase transparency within the group and ensure a more inclusive decision-making process needs to be undertaken. This assumes importance given that money is being collected

at many different levels and for different purposes (for the sangha fund, SHGs and the mahasangha). At present the women seemed clear that the sangha fund money is for collective purposes whereas the SHG collection is for the economic betterment of individual members. This desire to build a collective fund and other collective efforts (to build the Mahila Kutir for example) is positive.

The role of the sangha women (their own self-perception and that of the community) is a supportive and service oriented one. This is particularly true of villages where the sanghas have been initiated through mothers groups (as part of DPEP and SSA). Here sangha women have been actively involved in mobilizing children for enrolment, ensuring regular attendance, helping out when teachers are unable to cope or are absent. While this is important there is a need to develop a more questioning attitude. For example, when discussing whether women had questioned the teachers for absenteeism or petitioned for more teachers, they said that this was not their role. Nor had they ever raised any of their concerns about quality of education with the school authorities. Similarly when we asked sangha women who have started cooking the mid-day meal and supervising its distribution, why they had taken on this additional responsibility of cooking (given that they already have heavy domestic burdens) they said that they were fulfilling their responsibilities as mothers. The women and the programme when deciding to take on this activity had not considered the fact that this was an extension and reinforcement of their domestic and reproductive roles. Additionally, though women were cooking the mid day meal they were unaware of any of the provisions of the scheme. The women need to be engaged and equipped to undertake such discussions. The programmes welfare-orientation has however enabled the sanghas to earn the good will of the community. In many of the villages visited men came out to say that they actively supported the programme.

It may be mentioned here that in Dhubri, the bidi making women were very critical about the mid day meal scheme. They felt this scheme is affecting the academic environment in the schools. Otherwise, they are also very happy about the MS programme and feel that they are doing good work as sangha members and also as members of mothers Groups. At the village level there are two sets of group formation - the self-help groups and the sangha. The self-help groups have been formed according



to the norms of the district and block administration. The women have been keen to form SHGs as it has enabled them to avail of group loans. (These loans are only available to groups formed according to the stipulated norms). Once the group loan is taken the women divide the loan amongst the members and they use this individually for income generating activities. MS has encouraged SHG formation as there is a pressure on them (from the women) to undertake income generating activities. As one MS staff said, "since we cannot offer them anything at least we can facilitate these processes".

There are varying numbers of SHGs in different villages and the monthly contribution SHG members make also differs (for examples, contributions vary from Rs 20 to 50). While the programme does not see any problems arising from these different group formations, there is a need to examine more closely the inter linkages and dynamics between SHG and sangha processes. The SHGs are presently seen as forums where only economic issues are discussed, whereas the sangha takes up other issues as well. We were told that the sangha was necessary, as not all women could become SHG members, as they could not afford the monthly contribution. However, as economic concerns dominate both SHG and sanghas agenda, in the future concerns of the SHGs could creep into the sangha space as well. It is important to be vigilant about this as we observed that the distinction between the sanghas and the SHGs were more clearly articulated in the older sanghas. In addition we did hear of several other government programmes also forming SHGs, which could lead to confusion at the ground level. Moreover, as a number of other government schemes are now implemented through SHGs, SHGs formed under the MS umbrella will be approached by different agencies. There is a need to equip SHG and sangha members with decision-making and negotiation skills so that they can protect and further their interests.

In Darrang, sangha women were not involved with panchayat processes and they did not have much information on panchayats even though elections have been held a couple of years ago. In one village meeting where a pradhan was also present, when we were asking the women about panchayats and schemes being implemented through the panchayats, he intervened to say this was not something that women are informed about. He went on to say that the sangha women have been

doing a great job forming SHGs, mothers group and doing collective farming and should continue to do that. Due to a lack of time one was not able to probe deeper but the relationship between the sanghas and panchayats and women's role in participating in panchayat processes needs to be examined in greater depth.

In Dhubri, there is some association with the panchayats, a few sangha members were also reported to have contested and won the panchayat elections. The two groups, however, do not seem to have cordial relations. An incident was cited where a clash between the sangha and the panchayat had stood on the way of the release of funds for construction of a road.

c) Mahasanghas

In the financial year 1999-2000, AMSS team tried to incorporate withdrawal strategy with the activities of the Sangha women. In case of Goalpara district, it was incorporated with the programme launching process itself. Hence, in this financial year, AMSS team gave equal emphasis on both the sangha level and cluster level approach. The core-groups were formed in the sanghas. The whole process led to the emergence of the federating structure. In the year 2003-04, AMSS activities were focused to initiate Block federation, which was limited to Panchayat or Cluster federation. In that connection block level sharing has been started in strong areas.

Now, the most common aim of the sangha women is to form mahasanghas and get registered. The more commonly mentioned reasons for the same were -

- To increase their income earning potential
 - To be able to access government loans, schemes and training programmes
 - To improve their children's futures
 - For the uplift of the community

In some villages women mentioned that they have formed mahasangha in order to get things done which they cannot do at the sangha level. On further probing it became clear that mahasanghas were important in situations where the strength of numbers and representation of a larger constituency were required to create

pressure. For example, to get things done by the administration (an example given was to get a water supply connection sanctioned) or to solve the gender related problems the strength of Mahasangha has mattered. (For example, in cases of polygamy or eve teasing). In some situations when women had found it difficult to take case up at the sangha level, it had been solved at the mahasangha level.

In Dhubri, each and every sangha member advocated for getting the federations registered. They believe that if the mahasanghas are registered, then

- It will be easier to work with government departments and take benefits of various government schemes.
- The people/women in the sanghas will have confidence on the mahasangha
- It will be easier to get the trainings provided by various departments
- Some women even said that men folk would be compelled to give them recognition if they get registered.

The sangha women are getting prepared to continue their work if in the future the MS exits. For getting registration, some federations

- have acquired assets/land in the name of the federation
- have conducted programmes under their own banner,
- prepared annual reports of their activities,
- written the constitution of the federation(s).

Eight such federations have approached the district authorities for registration. The DIU has helped them in this regard.

However, the discussions also revealed that there was a lack of clarity and role differentiation between the sangha and mahasangha (i.e. there is an overlap in the objectives and roles). In some cases it is nearly a year since mahasanghas have been meeting and there is a need to work with them to sharpen their vision.

The process of mahasangha formation is seen together with the sahayoginis gradual withdrawal. At one level this has created a sense of independence amongst the women. Women unanimously said that they were confident of functioning in the absence of MS and the sahayoginis.

At another level, women were not clear as to how they would take this process forward, what kind of support they required. Their information levels on government schemes, how to access them etc., and on legal issues was low. As of now it would be premature to think that the sanghas and mahasanghas would be able to function autonomously.

At the māhasangha meetings in Darrang, it was observed that the leaders were conducting the meeting quite confidently. They had learnt all the formal proceedings (setting on agenda, keeping minutes etc) of conducting the meeting. It was impressive to see women leaders conducting and managing meetings of large numbers of women. In the next phase of the programme more attention needs to be placed on developing leadership skills and monitoring the content and processes of meetings. For, instance, the facilitation skills of the leaders needs to be enhanced. At the meeting observed, representatives of all the sanghas present reported on their last month's activities. However after their report no questions were asked, the problems raised were not discussed. Nor was this report linked to the previous month's report.

In Dhubri, no such formal meeting on progress could be witnessed. As such, the proceedings of the previous meetings recorded were scrutinised. From those it has been observed that, the observations regarding activities in a meeting are nearly the same. There is no scope for any critical analysis of the activities.

Issue based core groups (health, education, economic development programmes, legal and social) have been formed at the sangha and mahasangha level. In order to ensure wide participation at the sangha level all members belong to some core group. However, several women were not aware which committee they belonged to, nor was there any clarity about what these core groups were meant to do. Moreover, the agendas of the core groups at the sangha and mahasangha level overlap. At both the sangha and mahasangha level the education core groups talked about monitoring the schools and the health groups primarily talked about hygiene, cleanliness and family planning. Moreover, we were unable to gauge how this agenda had changed or evolved over the years, what new information they had got. There is a need to re-look at the training strategy for core group members and to work with the core groups to develop concrete action plans for the future.

Overall comments on sanghas and mahasanghas

- Large numbers of women are members of sanghas and mahasanghas but it was not clear how many are active. The leaders (sakhi and sahsakhi) and ex-leaders (leaders are selected by the women on a rotational basis) dominated the meetings. The system of rotational leadership is effective as the pool of women leaders are certainly expanding. The issue of leadership, both at the sangha and mahasangha level however, needs to be examined more closely. Who are the women who are taking on leadership roles? Though the sanghas and mahasanghas cut across caste and religious lines, there is a need to consider more closely whose interests are being articulated and served.

Similarly, questions like who qualifies to become a leader? need to be asked. The women when asked this question said that the leader should be educated (i.e. have formal education), be able to move about and speak out. The women categorically said that it was inconceivable for non-literate women to take on leadership roles, as it required a great deal of paper work and interacting with the outside world (non-literate women are cheated and not respected). In other words the non-literate women, who were poorer and more marginalized, did not qualify for leadership. Moreover, an impressionistic observation was that the women leaders were from more well to do, upper-caste families. If the sanghas and mahasanghas are to represent interests of the poor and marginalized, and if one of the aims of MS is to develop leadership abilities in such women, there needs to be more discussion about such issues.

- The other aspect that becomes important at the mahasangha level is the need to take on board the needs and interests of different communities. The MS programme does not raise the issue of differences between communities (i.e. for example between tribals and non-tribals, between different castes and religions) or about conflict, though such perceptions exist in the societies in which women live. At the district level the MS staff said that given the

complex socio-political context of Assam it would be impossible to organize women if such issues are talked about. Probably, the women too value such a neutral space. However, in the absence of the unifying role now being played by the sahayoginis, will sanghas and mahasanghas be able to deal with such issues? MS should see how it could in a constructive way discuss issues of identity and difference within the group.

- The levels of development of the sanghas and mahasanghas vary considerably. Sanghas have been categorised as strong, medium and weak but variations within the categories still exist. There is a need to re-look at these criteria, as they are predominantly quantitative. Along with quantitative indicators, qualitative indicators need to be developed to assess sangha and mahasangha functioning. If one is to assess sanghas and mahasanghas readiness to function automatically it is important to take cognizance of processes being undertaken. It is not only important to hold meetings but to monitor and strengthen the content of these meetings. What discussions are taking place, from what perspective, how participatory are the meetings etc. With sahayoginis now having the responsibility of nearly 25 villages it will probably be difficult for them to undertake this.
- There is an overwhelming push from the women to take on economic programmes, access loans and schemes. MS needs to decide the extent to which they would like to get involved in income generating activities. Economic development programmes have specific demands. If MS and sahayoginis are withdrawn it is not clear who is going to ensure that the gender and social agenda does not fall by the way side. As of now the sanghas and mahasanghas were unable to articulate a blue print for the future with regard to gender and other social issues.

4.5 Monitoring, Reporting and Documentation

Various reports are maintained at both the State and the district level. However, very few analytical reports were available. Further inputs in documentation and report writing need to be provided to the staff.

Review meeting at District level held once a month at the DIU level is attended by all Sahayoginies from the entire district along with DIU members and the in charge from State office, Review meeting at State level held once in two months attended by the SPD, SRP, Consultants, DPCs, RPs, JRPs and Accounts personnel and Executive Committee Meetings organized quarterly and are attended by the EC members including the National Programme Director provide the scope for periodic evaluation of the activities of different levels of the MS.

It appears that the reporting at these meetings is more narrative than analytical. Secondly, a resource person from the state office attends every monthly district level review meeting. Besides getting an overview of the work done in the district, her role in this meeting is unclear. What critical edge does the state office representative add? The programme should consider whether her time in the district could be more effectively used to strengthen others aspects of the programme

Accountants meet is held regularly on monthly basis to review financial progress and for proper utilization of fund. On the basis of feed back plans are made accordingly.

A system of internal evaluation has also been developed. Through performance report of each team member annual evaluation is done.

Time to time Internal Evaluation on various issues has also been done.

The experts of this line have conducted a state level programme evaluation in each AMSS district during the 1st week of December 04. The preliminary reports of the evaluation were supplied to the national evaluation team.

Research studies done as a part of the internal evaluation process lack conceptual clarity and have not followed any standard methodology. The preliminary report of the state level programme evaluation also has failed to provide a critical assessment of the programme. This can perhaps be expected in the final report.

In addition to the research studies, as part of documentation, different types of meeting reports are available, but the quality could be improved. Different modules have been developed with varied quality. Instead of “reinventing the wheel”, it would be advisable to review the existing materials in other parts of the country on legal, education, health issues and adapt, translate to the Assam context. The AMSS materials need to

have a strong “local cultural context flavour” relevant for the various ethnic groups that they are working with – *Bodos, Rabas tribes*, immigrants etc. It seems that in Assam itself, Gyan Vigyan Samiti has developed good materials, VHAA etc., which need to be screened and then perhaps utilized if, found appropriate.

AMSS has developed a module for adolescent girls. Material on physical, physiological changes, emotional/mental changes, nutrition, friends, work, career, environment, health, marriage, parenthood etc. that is available in other parts of the country could be reviewed and adapted to be used in the Assam context. Life Skills modules have also been developed. As the literacy levels are high, there could be interesting, colourful materials with information and for fun.

There needs to be a more systematic and regular evaluation cycle based on a rigorous study design. The empowerment construct in girls and women needs to be assessed over a period of time. There is a need to study what kind of impact the program has on the women, their families and communities.

4.6 Organizational Issues

The AMSS had undergone leadership changes quite a number of times during its short span of life. There have also been some other changes in the organisational set up.

Darrang district has had one district co-ordinator from its inception, ensuring a degree of continuity and stability. However, other DIU staffs from Darrang district have been transferred at regular intervals to other districts. At present a number of the DIU staff are new and many have not received in-depth training. Several of the *sahayoginis* had a better understanding of issues, the programme and communication skills. The capabilities of the DIU have to be enhanced considerably to take on the challenges of the programme.

In the case of Dhubri, the DPC and a few other staff members are new recruits. Some of the staff members are more experienced in MS than the DPC. In Dhubri, it was also observed that the responsibilities among the

MS staff are not divided very systematically. Moreover, the DPC also does not seem to be well equipped to manage a district like Dhubri, where the MS is spread over a large area and also among diversified population groups. Dhubri being an old MS district. Much more maturity was expected, which was not perceived at all. To some extent it can also be attributed to the inexperienced new incumbents who are less acquainted with the MS philosophy. From the staff members working since the inception of the AMSS, it could be gathered that the earlier recruits had undergone a more rigorous selection process and had also much more intensive training on MS. In the case of new recruitments, the MS experience was not counted as essential. This could not be understood why the earlier process was dropped and that too at a time when the programme is expected to go to scale.

The National MS office should provide orientation and training to the new Directors of the SPO's in states, to make the transition and understanding of the MS philosophy smooth and easy. For an effective leader, an understanding of the MS philosophy and importance of the empowerment approach is crucial. There should be ongoing trainings to further develop the skills of the staff members more on issues.

The staff hired by the old process of field work and understanding and experience on women's issues seemed to have created more committed, motivated staff compared to the newer staff who had a more limited understanding on women's issues. The older process needs be revived.

The program in the state needs more effective leadership and visibility within the government departments and NGO sector in the state. Currently, the division of roles and responsibilities at the district level is not adequate. The DPC and the DRPs, JRPs all have divided responsibilities and blocks. The DPC should be responsible for overall supervision, advocacy and linkages with the government and shouldn't be expected to manage the day-to-day operations of the program implementation. That should be managed by the other staff members. The roles and responsibilities should be clearly stated.

Reviewing the budget, funds received, funds utilization and "burn-rate"- it appears that AMSS has had problems in receiving funds on time from the Central Government which has affected program efforts. There should also be contingency expenses for unforeseen circumstances and

emergencies. In Assam's case, there have been recurring floods every few months, which has disrupted program efforts on the ground. The "Gayatris" are also not paid anything for their services within the education component and this needs to be re-examined.

There should be a fund within the budget for some innovative initiatives that allow for some flexibility and supports programs that are culturally relevant and specific for the different ethnic groups, which is the situation in Assam.

In the current salary structure, the old and new employees who have recently been hired seem to be earning the similar salaries. This does not give credit to the experience gained from working within the MS program and leads to feelings of discrimination within the organization. Salaries should be given acknowledging experience and seniority.

SECTION 5

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the context of the critical conditions in Assam and the changes in leadership and financial crises that the AMSS had undergone, whatever work AMSS could do deserves credit. Especially the spirit of the MS staff and their ability to sustain the enthusiasm of the sangha women during the difficult period reflects the strong foundation of the programme. The evaluation team however feels that certain changes/improvements are required to make the programme stronger. These recommendations are given below:

Expansion & Reach

There should be a clear objective/purpose for expansion and not just expansion for the sake of expansion.

The MS program in the state of Assam should reflect the cultural context of the state and build in innovations to address the needs of the different ethnic groups.

Given the current human resources available one felt that the programme should consider prioritizing consolidation and deepening of on-going processes and move more slowly on expanding.

The programme will also have to strategize on how they can continue to do intensive work in critical areas while expanding at the same time.

Inputs/ strategies at field level for information dissemination, knowledge building, skill development, and creation of alternatives for women/girls empowerment and learning

More intensive training be provided to sahayoginis and the MS staff.

The programme should look into the issue of providing a broad based and in-depth understanding of gender issues to its workers.

The programme should assess the quality of trainings being conducted at different levels (state, district, and village), in terms of content (including conceptual understanding and methodology).

In terms of methodology, more interactive methods, which enable participants to express themselves and develop analytic skills, could be incorporated.

Working further on the existing training materials is critical given that MS is moving towards functioning as a resource centre.

District units should be encouraged to develop, modify and adapt training material, modules and determine programme content to reflect local realities, concerns and cultural forms.

Field level programmes

In the case of EDP activities, there should be different strategies for those women who have a traditional skill. The input provided to them needs to be at the next level of helping with marketing, design, product development and developing entrepreneurship skills. While for other groups who are being taught new skills, the inputs need to be different.

The EDP needs also be supported by the information and training on the changed policy decisions that affect these activities.

Under educational activities, there is a need to strengthen the literacy programme in terms of content and pedagogy.

The programme needs to be designed keeping in mind learners' needs and interests and by considering how the women can use literacy skills in their sangha, mahasangha and SHG activities.

If the MS wants to take interested women to some stable levels of literacy, which is critical for sangha and mahasangha sustainability and to ensure greater participation of poorer and more marginalized women,

then it needs to provide substantive programmatic support (even if they are not providing honorarium).

MS could explore the possibility of running MSKs (short courses) for interested women and developing specific literacy and issue based curricula for such programmes. A leadership development component could also be included. The MS staff at the district and state will have to develop the necessary skills to design and take forward a creative literacy programme.

There is a need to review the current literacy and education materials and make those more relevant to the MS and Assam context, sensitivity to gender issues should also be included.

Given Assam's vulnerability to floods, disaster preparedness against earthquakes (seismic zone) and floods needs to be included in awareness programs.

While dealing with these legal issues and fighting for rights, the solution offered needs to be assessed.

The nari adalats should be given proper training to equip themselves with the ability to deal with the legal issues.

For popularising the health concepts there is need to use more of the traditional media that is present in Assam. Convergence with other agencies working on health issues is required.

Working with adolescent girls- Kishori Sanghas: The Kishori Sanghas need more regular inputs and the issues covered should be more relevant to their lives. They need to have a program more geared to their needs and shouldn't be overshadowed by the work with women.

The *key issues* are providing health/family life education with a focus on gender sensitisation, reproductive health issues, anatomy, menstruation, preparing for marriage, parenthood, ante natal, post natal care, immunisation, contraceptive services, personality development, issues

related to violence and abuse to both adolescent girls and boys. Also included could be nutrition supplementation and education for adolescent girls.

The second important issue is the need for counselling and health services to unmarried girls and married adolescent couples.

Most of the current programs are focussed on girls but to change societal attitudes, it is very important to also sensitise boys on gender issues.

Resource Centre

The objectives and target audience of the proposed resource centre need be clearly identified. It is also important to assess the staffing requirements for the centre as it shouldn't infringe on the current activities of the AMSS and the current staff time needed to provide technical support and assistance to the district interventions.

The materials prepared aiming at the establishment of a Resource centre will have to be improved both in terms of quality and quantity.

3.5 Inter-linkages/convergence with National/State level programmes & organizations

MS should be pro active in establishing linkages with various National/State level programmes & organizations

a.Changes at individual and family level

To ensure the continuation of the positive impact of the MS on the individual and the family level, sanghas needs be strengthened. The sahayoginis role in laying the strong foundation of the sanghas has been crucial and must be recognized.

With regard to SHGs, sanghas and mahasanghas, efforts to increase transparency within the group and ensure a more inclusive decision-making process needs to be undertaken.

There is a need to re-look at the training strategy for core group members and to work with the core groups to develop concrete action plans for the future.

The issue of leadership, both at the sangha and mahasangha level however, needs to be examined more closely.

There should be clarity of the concept and role differentiation between the sangha and mahasangha

MS should see how it could in a constructive way discuss issues of identity and difference within the group.

Along with quantitative indicators, qualitative indicators need to be developed to assess sangha and mahasangha functioning.

MS needs to decide the extent to which they would like to get involved in income generating activities

Monitoring, Reporting and Documentation

Further inputs in documentation and report writing need to be provided to the staff.

Qualitative improvement be made in documentation materials.

Reviewing the existing materials in other parts of the country on legal, education, health issues and adapt/ translate the same to the Assam context.

There needs to be a more systematic and regular evaluation cycle based on a rigorous study design.

There is a need to study what kind of impact the program has on the women, their families and communities

Organizational Issues

The National MS office should provide orientation and training to the new Directors of the SPO's in states. There should be ongoing trainings to further develop the skills of the staff members more on issues.

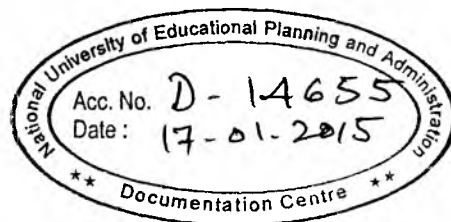
The roles and responsibilities of the MS staff should be clearly stated.

Fund flow to the MS should be regular and there should also be contingency expenses for unforeseen circumstances and emergencies

There should be a fund within the budget for some innovative initiatives that allow for some flexibility and supports programs that are culturally relevant and specific for the different ethnic groups, which is the situation in Assam.

Salaries should be given acknowledging experience and seniority.

- In conclusion, it can be suggested that the AMSS needs to consolidate existing work and improve its quality before embarking on a scaled expansion, which will give the increase in quantity but may lead to a reduction in quality. This is an empowerment programme and in no way the same as the SHG movement. Care must be taken to protect the identity, concept and the philosophy of MS while it moves further.



FIELD VISIT : GOALPARA

Day 1 (14.12.04)

Nabasalpara, Darranggiri Panchayat, interaction with instructress (es)

1. Interaction with women attending health awareness camps (Balabari CRC)
2. Visit to Ouguri Sakata village, Daranggiri Panchayat.
Ouguri sakata, Dhansiri Mahila Samata Sangha, Sangha Kutir, Omala Kendra visited.
3. Village visited: Kadampur Rustuwa village, Puronivita panchayat
Dabpara village, Adarsha Mahila Samata Sangha.

Day 2 (15.12.04)

4. Village visited: Hatigaon: Badahpur panchayat.Dhirawati Mahila Samata Sangha.
5. Attended Mhasangha meeting at Badahpur Bishnujyoti Mahasangha.
6. Inspected Kishori Mancha at Badahpura Village.

Day 3(16.12.04)

7. Village visited: Baida Village: Dodam Panchayat, attended Dainy(Witch)meeting
8. Meeting with federation members, Lala Panchayat.

FIELD VISIT : DARRANG

Day 1 (14.12.04)

1. Interactions with sangha and mahasangha (Sanghas: Bhakatpara, Chanberinika, Daimali, Mamata, Anjali, Mariam, Warpara village, Balabari Jnanodaya, Jagipara Milanjyoti, Niz- Samabari Jaimati dal, Pohar Sandhani)
2. Interaction with women attending health awareness camps (Balabari CRC)
3. Interaction with sangha women (Konakata & Rohini Kasha)

Day 2 (15.12.04)

4. Interaction with sangha women - mahila kutir (Salikajhar kutir, Barbori)
5. Jaimati Mahila samata, Milijuli, Phulan Devi, Kanaklata)
6. Dipila Gramya Nari Adalat
7. Duni Padmadevi sangha
8. Ma Fatema mahila samata Sangha (educational camp)
9. Mahasangha meeting (Bonmajha panchayat)
10. Meeting with sahayoginis (District Office)
11. Interaction with sangha women
12. Manpahi Kishori Mancha

Day 3 (16.12.04)

13. Interaction with sangha women - including Omala kendra (No 1 Kamarpara, Durgagaon, Bengabara & No. 2 Kamarpara)
14. Sangha women (mid day meal) (Gariapara)
15. Interaction with literacy volunteers attending phase 2 training (Aulachowka)
16. Aoutala mahila sabalikiran Aikya Mancha Mahasangha (with 14 sanghas)
17. Meeting with DRG members
18. Meeting with DIU members

FIELD VISIT: DHUBRI

Day 1 (14.12.04)

1. Interactions with DIU members at Bilasipara IB
2. Interactions with sangha and mahasangha members at the Women Convention and exhibition at Gobardhanpara.
3. Interaction with children and instructors at the RBC at Sonaluguri.
4. Interaction with sangha women (Bodo village) at Mahila Kutir at Takimari.

Day 2 (15.12.04)

1. Met with DIU staff and tour of the office
2. Interaction with Kishori Sangha members.
3. Interaction with the Bidi making village/ sangha women and community members at Madhusoulmari Tiamari.
4. Visit to Child Care Centre at Madhusoulamari Tiamari.
5. Mahasangha meeting at Madhusoulmari GP hall Kudimari.
6. Interaction with community members

Day 3 (16.12.04)

1. Interaction with sangha women and 'Gayatri Kendra' at Chalakura Char (riverine area)
2. DRG meeting
3. Meeting with Sahayoginis.
4. Meeting with Mahasangha and Nari Adalat members at Barakanda.
5. Meeting with DIU members.
6. Meeting with DC, Dhubri.

TABLE 1.1 Population (1991-2001): by Districts: Assam (Persons)

Districts	1991	2001	Density per Sq. Km., 2001
1.Darrang	1,298,860	1,503,943	432
2.Dhubri*	1,324,404	1,634,589	584
3.Goalpara	668,138	822,306	451
Assam	22,414,322	26,638,407	324

Note: * Population figures for these two districts are recast due to transfer of 20 Villages from Dhubri District to Kokrajhar District after 1991 census.

1981 Census was not conducted in Assam

SOURCE: Census of India 2001; Assam: Provisional Population Totals. Census of India 1991: Assam State District Profile 1991.

TABLE 1.2 Decadal Growth Rate of Population (1901-2001): by Districts: Assam

Sl. No	Districts	Decadal Growth Rate								
		1901-11	1911-21	1921-31	1931-41	1941-51	1951-61	1961-71	1971-91	1991-01
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)
1	Darrang	(-) 0.25	+11.78	+26.00	+35.30	+24.13	+44.75	+43.24	+55.63	+15.79
2	Dhubri *	+29.97	+26.92	+15.76	+14.83	+9.25	+27.44	+40.45	+56.47	+23.42
3	Goalpara	+29.97	+26.92	+15.76	+14.83	+9.25	+37.10	+45.88	+54.12	+23.07
23	Assam	+16.99	+20.48	+19.91	+20.40	+19.93	+34.98	+34.95	+53.26	+18.85

Note: * Population figures for these two districts are recast due to transfer of 20 villages from Dhubri District to Kokrajhar District after 1991 census.

SOURCE: Census of India 2001; Assam: Provisional Population Totals. Census of India 1991: Assam State District Profile 1991.

TABLE 1.3 SEX RATIO: ASSAM: By DISTRICTS 1971-2001.
(Per 1000 males)

State/Districts	Area	1971	1991	2001
1. Darrang	Total	907	938	943
	Rural	915	942	946
	Urban	718	854	884
2. Dhubri	Total	930	950	944
	Rural	944	953	945
	Urban	824	927	942
3.Goalpara	Total	939	947	955
	Rural	947	949	957
	Urban	802	925	926
ASSAM	TOTAL	896	923	932
	RURAL	912	934	940
	URBAN	744	838	878

1981 census was not conducted in Assam

.@ Worked out on the basis of interpolated figures of Assam

SOURCE: Census of India 2001: Assam: Provisional Population Totals. Rural-Urban Distribution. Paper-2 of 2001. Census of India 1991: Assam State District Profile 1991.

TABLE 1.4 Child Sex ratio in Assam: By districts

State/Districts	Area	Sex ratio of child population (0-6) age group. (Per 1000 Male Child)	
		1991	2001
1. Darrang	Rural	973	975
	Urban	926	954
2. Dhubri	Rural	979	986
	Urban	968	956
3. Goalpara	Rural	977	973
	Urban	971	1004

Source: Census of India 2001; Assam; Provisional Population Totals; Rural Urban Distribution ; PAPER-2 of 2001.

TABLE 1.5 Crude Birth Rate and Total Fertility Rate: Assam: by District (1991)

Assam/Districts	Crude Birth Rate	Total Fertility Rate
1. Darrang	42.03	5.46
2. Dhubri	38.16	5.12
3. Goalpara	35.21	4.52
ASSAM	31.47	4.16

Source: Census of India 1991: Assam State District Profile 1991

TABLE 1.6 Mean age at Marriage: Assam: by districts (1991)

Assam/Districts	Area	Mean age at marriage of currently married women		
		Total	Who married during	
			1981-86	1986-91
1. Darrang	Total	17.96	18.28	18.73
	Rural	17.93	18.23	18.64
	Urban	18.39	19.32	20.11
2. Dhubri	Total	16.86	17.20	17.48
	Rural	16.74	17.03	17.28
	Urban	17.71	18.58	19.09
3. Goalpara	Total	17.50	17.68	18.15
	Rural	17.48	17.66	18.05
	Urban	17.82	17.97	19.17
ASSAM	Total	18.23	18.49	18.92
	Rural	18.15	18.36	18.73
	Urban	18.84	19.54	20.37

SOURCE: Census of India 1991. ASSAM STATE District Profile 1991.

TABLE 1.7 Age group wise Child Mortality: Assam: by districts :1991

Year	Age 0-1 Yrs			Age 0-2 Yrs			Age 0-5 Yrs		
	Pers ons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females
1. Darrang	111	118	86	120	119	120	131	131	131
2. Dhubri	128	123	132	143	151	137	166	169	162
3. Goalpara	106	109	103	111	113	110	133	138	127
Assam	92	96	87	101	104	98	116	118	115

N.B.: Figures for the 1981 census is not available, as the census could not be conducted due to disturbed conditions

N.A.: Data not available.

Source: Census of India 1991: Assam State District Profile 1991.

TABLE 1.8 Literacy Rates by sex: Assam: by districts (1981-2001)

Districts	Area	1991			2001		
		P	M	F	P	M	F
1.Darrang	T	42.00	50.80	32.53	55.92	64.32	46.95
	R	40.12	49.01	30.62	54.23	62.77	45.15
	U	76.02	81.68	69.28	86.20	91.14	80.54
2.Dhubri	T	38.36	47.38	28.79	49.86	56.61	42.64
	R	33.55	42.74	23.82	45.73	52.52	38.46
	U	69.36	76.75	61.31	78.20	84.77	71.21
3.Goalpara	T	46.81	55.47	37.58	58.56	65.36	51.40
	R	44.84	53.58	35.54	56.75	63.67	49.50
	U	68.73	76.18	60.58	77.32	82.58	71.57
Assam	T	61.87	43.03	52.89	71.93	56.03	64.28

Source: Provisional Population Totals, Census of India-2001, Assam, Paper I& II of 2001, Census of India: 1991

TABLE 1.9 Health Infrastructure: Assam: by Districts, 2000-2001

Assam/ Districts	Hospitals	Primary Health Centres	Dispensaries	Beds	Rural Family Welfare Planning Centres	Sub Centres
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
1.Darrang	8	35	14	423	7	322
2.Dhubri	11	23	12	551	7	303
3.Goalpara	5	17	11	196	5	134
ASSAM	161	610	323	12868	268	5109
Assam Total Per lakh of population	0.60	2.29	1.21	48.38	1.01	19.21

Note: Last row estimated from the totals for Assam

Source: Statistical Handbook Assam, 2002

TABLE 1.10 Total no of different forms of Crime Against Women In Assam by districts from 1997-2002

Sl. No.	Districts/Type of crime	Kidnapping	Rape	Molestation	Cruelty by husband	Dowry death	Immoral traffic	Total	Percentage share of each district
1	Darrang	261	242	292	150	21	0	966	4.33
2	Dhubri	290	250	285	569	17	2	1413	6.33
3	Goalpara	144	149	139	248	2	2	684	3.07

Source: Office of the DIG,CID ,Assam

Annexure 1.1
Trend in expansion of AMSS Coverage from the year 1997-2004

Year	1997-98	1998-99	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003	2003-2004	As on September, 04
No. of District	3	5	5	5	5	5	6	6
No. of Block	3	6	10	10	10	10	25	27
No. of Cluster/Panchayat	18	47	61	66	66	84	114	190
No. of Village	150	467	611	665	665	823	1350	1556

Source: Asom Mahila Samata Society

Annexure - 1.2
Expansion of villages through federation & Sangha

Sl. No.	Name of District	No. of villages expanded through Sangha	No. of villages Expanded through Federation	Total
1.	Darrang	10	22	32
2.	Dhubri	17	37	54
3.	Morigaon	5	28	87
4.	Goalpara	30	17	47
5.	Sonitpur	3	Nil	3
Total		65	94	159

Source: Asom Mahila Samata Society

Annexure – 1.2
Overview of Outreach by AMSS

Year	1997-98	1998-99	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003	2003-2004	As on October,04
No. of Sangha evolved	85	189	337	498	674	873	927	1778
Sangha members	1700	8977	16959	29,658	40108	54,899	56,928	77233
Jagrity Kendra	38	126	210	213	231	-	154	352
Learners	760	-	-	-	2793	5,658	8,129	20082
Literacy Camp	-	-	-	6	9	-	89	136
Learners	-	-	-	-	713	2126	4,638	5632
SVK	27	52	80	80	80	82	193	273
Kishory Manch	-	-	8	12	20	50	236	488
No. of Kishory involved	-	-	-	-	-	1250	5,953	11105
Sangha Kutir	4	20	27	-	-	-	59	79
No. of savings groups	85	141	232	383	727	779	744	651
No. of SHG	-	-	-	-	-	821	1042	1833

Source: Asom Mahila Samata Society

EXPANSION STRATEGY OF AMSS

Initially AMSS started its activities in 3 districts of Darrang, Dhubri & Morigaon in 1997 with target of 50 villages in each district.

The approach :

In each district 50 villages were selected for initiating MS activities by considering the following criteria: -

- Low female literacy rate.
- Flood free and disturb free area.

(For ensuring accessibility in all the seasons so that team can have experience throughout the year)

- Contiguous Villages were selected.

2nd phase Expansion of villages within the existing districts:

Strategies:

- Low female literacy areas (Block)
- Focused on marginalized women.
- Move towards more remote areas
- Expansion through ripple affect.

Expansion in New district:

(A) In the year 1998-99 AMSS activities expanded into two more districts

- Sonitpur
- Goalpara



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