

MAHILA SAMAKIYA GUJARAT

REPORT

ON

EXTERNAL EVALUATION

1999

**State Programme Director Office
Hostel Building
Govt. Polytechnic Campus
Ambawadi
Ahmedabad - 380 015**

Report of Evaluation

Evaluation team:

Banaskantha

Chhaya Datar, TISS, Mumbai
Divya Pandey, Mumbai

Baroda

Geeta Menon, Bhopal
Indu Capoot, CHETNA, Ahmedabad

Halol (Panchmahal)

Anjali Dave, TISS, Mumbai

Rajkot, Surendranagar

Nishi Mehrotra, GTZ, Delhi
Prasad M. Chacko, BSC, Ahmedabad

Sabarkantha

Om Shrivastava, *Astha*, Udaipur
Runu Chakraborty, Delhi

1. Mahila Samakhya, Gujarat

Mahila Samakhya Gujarat began its work in Baroda, Rajkot and Sabarkantha in 1989, as part of the larger initiative of the Mahila Samakhya programme in the country. Banaskantha was added in 1994 and Halol and Surendranagar in January 1998. In keeping with the GOI decision at the inception of the programme, MS-Gujarat was established as a registered Society through which the Mahila Samakhya Programme (funded by the Dutch embassy), will be carried out. However, following a State level decision, the chief functionary of Gujarat-MS (the State Programme Director or SPD) has since the beginning been a government official (on deputation). This decision has been reversed only recently, in 1997, when a non-government person was appointed as the SPD.

According to the Annual Report, 1997-98, MS-Gujarat worked in 999 villages in 34 Blocks in four Districts (up to mid-1998). To this should be added those in the two new

Districts as well as villages added in the old Districts since then¹. There are as many *mahila sanghas*, as village women's collectives are the prime aim as well as the main instrument of all work undertaken by the programme. The *sanghas* are visualised as a *process* rather than a mere functioning body.

MS-Gujarat has developed several supportive programmes with the aim of strengthening rural women. Those common to all Districts are childcare centres where children of working mothers are given pre-school education and a nutritious mid-day meal; literacy classes and adult education centres in villages; and savings groups that address economic exigencies of rural women. In addition, there are short and long-span camps on various issues (education, health, law, violence, etc.) that are common to all Districts. Individual Districts have also established innovative programmes on their own: the *nari adalats* or women's courts in Baroda and Rajkot, Balika/Mahila Shikshan Kendras in Sabarkantha, Baroda and Rajkot and health centres in Baroda, are examples. In all, there are 53 child care centres, 103 literacy units, 176 savings groups and 5 mahila kutirs (where women's groups meet for various purposes). As per the Annual report, there have been 43 health camps, 40 camps for adolescent girls, 598 legal courses and 84 women as *sarpanch* till mid-1998.

MS-Gujarat had from the beginning opted for what is popularly known as the 'Sakhi model', i.e., where paid and trained village leaders (representatives of the *sanghas*) undertake the responsibility of organising women, ensuring their participation and transferring the knowledge and skills they have acquired, to the women. The Sakhis are, in effect, the main support for the Sahayogini at the village level. In Gujarat, the Sakhis are selected on rotation, every year. Recent evaluations (including the Indo-Dutch Evaluation of 1997) of States that had opted for this model showed that skill transference is at the minimum and therefore the fear of the programme empowering mainly the Sakhis is prominent. In view of this, a conscious decision was taken to gradually phase out the Sakhis and establish direct contact with the *sangha* women. The honorarium of the Sakhi is to be handed over directly to the *sanghas*, depending on the norms developed. MS-Gujarat is presently in the process of this transition, and various experiments are being tried out in the Districts.

Another important concern at present is *sustainability* of MS activities and initiatives, as one of the main objectives of the Programme is the empowering of *sanghas* to take on more and more responsibility as the Programme advances. In keeping with this, the MS programme was also made time-bound and as of date, expires in April 2002. To address this, MS-Gujarat has been taking several steps over the past two years or so. The process adopted is establishing the stage of the *sanghas* (categorising them into strong, medium and weak), focussing on gradual phasing out of strong *sanghas* (beginning with lesser number of visits) and evolving strategies for medium and weak *sanghas* to become autonomous. This is on in the older Districts.

¹ Latest figures have not been put together yet. Figures of some Districts are mentioned in the individual evaluation reports.

A recent development in the State is the registration of a Union by some of the employees. The main demands are regularisation of employment and greater benefits and salaries. The Education Department, however, has emphasised that while it is the right of anyone to register a Union, this act has to be independent of the MS Programme, which is merely a time-bound project funded by a foreign government and channelised through the Ministry of Education.

2. The evaluation process

Other than the Indo-Dutch Evaluations, which are part of the MOU between GOI and the Netherlands Embassy, there has been no in-depth external evaluation of the programme in Gujarat. It was thought that such an evaluation is crucial at this juncture, when so many changes are taking place and MS-Gujarat is in need of a fresh view into its initiatives.

The present evaluation was designed primarily with this in mind, i.e., a pro-active and participatory effort that would bring out the various achievements, issues, problems and prospects of the programme. The parameters of evaluation, evolved by MS-Gujarat, is attached (Annexure 1). The process began with a detailed meeting with SPD, DPCs and other staff members at the State office on 25.1.99, where expectations were voiced and the strategies and methodology clarified. The team departed for the respective Districts the same evening. In the Districts, we had detailed discussion with Sahayoginis and other staff members and visited *sanghas* and other programme outlets of MS. The process ended with a formal de-briefing and discussion in the State office on 29.1.99.

In constituting the teams of two evaluators each (except for Halol), it was kept in mind that one member of the team should be familiar with the local language and culture and one of them should have prior experience with the MS process.

The main expectations that came up were:

- That the evaluation will be done in a participatory and friendly manner.
- The focus will be on programmes, but evaluation of the capacity of personnel will be part of the process.
- As much as possible, all programme components, all Blocks and weak as well as strong *sanghas* will be touched upon.
- Role change among Sakhis and Sahayoginis in keeping with the changes in MS over the past few years will be given attention
- There have been several experiments in *Sangha* strengthening and phasing out as well as expansion. The efficacy of these will be studied.
- Similarly, attempts at phasing out of Sakhis, particularly through concerted efforts in *sangha* training, will be a focus of attention.
- Several issues came up during the Indo-Dutch evaluation. How much these have been addressed needs to be studied.
- The extent of gender perspectives developed in the programme at various levels will be focussed on.

- The quality of trainings, their impacts, cost-effectiveness will find focus.
- The visibility of the programme at various levels will be reflected on, including the way in which demands are made on the *sanghas* and the way these respond to them.
- How far the programme has progressed and the extent of stagnation will be analysed in detailed.
- Sustainability of the programme will be a major point of focus.
- Coordination between different Districts and with the State office will be reflected on.
- Various pressures felt by the Programme will be addressed.

Several District specific expectations also came up, particularly those addressing programmes and innovations attempted: women and violence, economic empowerment and the *sangha* model process in Rajkot, the strength of *sanghas* and the impact of literacy camps in Banaskantha, literacy process, attempts at phasing out of *sanghas* and the economic issue in Sabarkantha and team rapport, insecurities felt, phasing out and expansion and integration of gender perspectives in Baroda.

The main issue that came up was *where does the actual power lie, after 10 years of work?*

The District reports, prepared by the teams that visited them, are appended. The reports differ visibly in style, structure and forms of expression, but the uniqueness of each has been retained as it is. What we bring out here are the main points that emerge in these. Our main objective in this evaluation has been to strengthen the efforts of MS-Gujarat and we hope that our observations and suggestions will provide the necessary impetus towards this. We are grateful to MS-Gujarat for providing us with this opportunity as well as all necessary support for this evaluation.

3. Achievements and highlights of MS-Gujarat

The evaluation teams unanimously share the view that MS-Gujarat has succeeded in creating a 'space' for rural poor women to get together, share experiences, voice their opinions and thoughts and impact upon their immediate social environment in various ways. To this extent, the much called-for 'visibility for women' has been created. The strength of their voice depends on the strength of individual *sanghas* and the strategies they adopt, but it could be said that collective bargaining skills have been developed, particularly on issues of violence against women, education and health. In many cases, *sangha* women have been able to successfully articulate their demands on local government bodies.

It is also visible across the board that MS functionaries, be it the DIU senior staff, the Sahayoginis or the Sakhi, have been empowered through the process of giving a shape and meaning to MS. They have visibility, mobility and ability to voice their opinions in their personal worlds, which they did not possess in the past. They are open, able to absorb both positive and negative feedback as well as prepared to learn and grow.

MS-Gujarat has been able to create opinions and strategise its interventions on several issues that affect women, predominantly violence, literacy, health, child care and 'cash of their own', i.e., women's savings. Issue based training has gone in to strengthen these initiatives.

Innovative interventions such as *nari adalats*, Ballika/Mahila Shikshan Kendras and health centres have been successful in providing a 'public' dimension to what has always been considered 'private domain'. With this, women have been able to negotiate for space in the traditional male domains of law, justice, family size, etc.

There are variations in achievements across Districts, and each District requires strengthening inputs in one or more of its components or processes. For individual Districts, please refer to the District reports. We try here to highlight those issues that come across as important for address for the MS-Gujarat family as such.

4. Emergent issues

4.1. Sangha Strength

One concern cutting across all District reports is that the *sanghas* which are the basic building blocks of the programme lack the required strength, particularly in relation to the MS philosophy and perspectives, to be able to function autonomously in the future and emerge as a force to reckon with. The past strategy of the programme and the paucity of resources deployed in strengthening the capacities of *sanghas* have resulted in this situation. Waking up to the situation when 'sustainability', 'phase-out' and 'rollback of functionaries' emerged as reigning concepts in MS, MS-Gujarat appears to have categorised its *sanghas* into strong, medium and weak in line with the processes in other States, but without evolving standard criteria across Districts. As a result, concerted and focussed thinking on strategies for strengthening has not been possible.

Part of the reason for this is the lack of coordinated efforts in the past to think and act together as one family. Consequently, a sense of separation has developed in the Districts, with each developing in its own way and evolving its own parameters of success. Needless to say, this has heightened the feeling of competition and comparison rather than cooperation.

As the programme is in its last phase, the future of *sanghas* is a point of concern in view of the above.

4.2. Representation and membership

Linked to this is the issue of who the *sangha* actually represents. Some of the District reports observe that favourable situations have not been created in the *sanghas* to enable expansion of membership within the village, or spontaneous demand for new *sanghas*. Hence, the *sangha* representation is limited to members who initially joined or a few who joined later. In many cases, women who have been or are desirous of working as a Sakhi

predominate the scene. The concerns of the larger community of women are therefore not represented.

Second, the *sanghas* largely concentrate on issues and concerns of older women as most members belong to the 'mother-in-law and grandmother' category. Daughters-in-law are not represented in a majority of cases and thereby their issues and concerns do not find representation either.

Inadequate involvement of the community at large, particularly of men, is another issue brought out in the District reports. In issues such as health and family planning, where women's decisions are naturally affected by those of their husbands and in-laws, this lacunae is particularly visible.

Contribution of the community and the *sanghas* in programme components initiated at the village level is another issue of concern that has been expressed. This has to be viewed particularly in the context of programme and process sustainability.

4.3. Sakhi and sangha model

The reports unanimously observe that village women are in favour of direct interaction and training of the *sangha* and rollback of the Sakhi. Some Districts have done commendable jobs in initiating this process. However, for instance in Baroda, the dimensions of this transition are as yet unclear to functionaries who seem to be caught in the confusing definitions of the 'Sakhi' and 'Sangha' models.

4.4. Capacity issues

Several concerns emerge on the capacity issue across Districts. While knowledge and skills on *issues* addressed along the way seem to be adequate, training and discussion skills appear to be weak. Listening skills, which are part of those related to skills in eliciting response, are inadequate. This naturally points to inadequate training of trainers, or TOT. Though the feeling of stagnation does not appear to be a crucial concern, Sahayoginis and other DIU staff do feel that they are unable to address growing demands from *sanghas*, particularly where *sanghas* have begun to ask questions. In addition, new concepts such as economic empowerment are not sufficiently clear.

Sangha training, though of comparatively recent origin, is not sufficiently effective.

In some programmes such as health, lack of capacity for integration of issues with women's lives and life-concerns has been expressed.

4.5. DIUs and the State

DIUs have emerged as strong units taking independent decisions over the years due to the fluctuations in the state office. In the present situation the State office has to be geared to take up challenging leadership and facilitative roles keeping in mind the emergent

needs of the programme. Another issue is the need for gradual development of the DIUs as support units rather than direct implementers. There has to be sufficient thought on this so that both the state office and the DIUs work a harmonious team.

The issue of intra-District and District-State coordination and combined thinking needs to be reiterated here, as this is a major concern in MS-Gujarat. The State office role in this is a point of focus. Greater efforts on the part of the State office in terms of joint thinking/planning exercises and training programmes will enable a more collaborative venture.

4.6. Insecurity

With a lack of challenging tasks (*new and demanding ideas and issues*) combined with talks of phasing out without sufficient clarification and discussion, a feeling of insecurity seems to have developed among DIU functionaries. Some express these as mere fear, while others have been more vociferous on the issue (re: the Trade Union mentioned above). This is also linked to the lack of support in the past from the State office in terms of visioning, planning and programme inputs, as well as clarifying the new processes and ideas coming into the Mahila Samakhya Programme.

4.7. Programme consolidation and coordination

In MS Gujarat it has been visible from the early years that expansion has been random and scattered. Today the programme spreads over more than 1000 villages across 34 Blocks in 6 districts. The expansion has not been in contiguous blocks or contiguous districts. Besides this, the selection criteria of districts and blocks had not been clearly defined. This has considerably affected programme interventions and inputs as monitoring and facilitation of resources became time consuming, lengthy and filled with gaps. Expansion was also not conducted in a planned manner.

4.8. Education / materials

This particular component of the programme has delivered commendable results as the various reports illustrate, for women and children. This has been due to innovative methodology and quality of materials developed. Consequently, they have generated a learning-and-seeking environment for education at the village level. But in some cases, there are inadequate skills in development, maintenance and use of material.

4.9. Economic Empowerment vs Sustainability

In today's situation where the commercial instinct has infiltrated rural areas with profusion, the *sanghas* have not remained untouched in this sector. This is particularly so in Gujarat, where commercial influences are high. The sanghas feel the need for raising additional income apart from wage earning work in agriculture or related sectors. Many women from tribal communities in Banaskantha, Baroda and Sabarkantha have expressed the desire to enhance their earning capacity despite the extra work burden that this may

bring. They are even willing to learn new skills to avail the income generating programmes of the government, for which the DIUs are facilitating linkages. Sanghas have even started savings and are accessing sangha funds from the programme.

In view of the larger structural factors involved in economic development, the MS programme is presently trying to grasp and understand the dynamics and implications of economic development programmes for the rural areas in general and for the life cycle and strength of sanghas in particular. Some thought has been given, but no systematic analysis conducted so far to envisage economic activities as a mechanism to truly empower women.

4.10. Documentation

MS-Gujarat had initiated process documentation sometime in 1994 and since then it has been carried on in many different ways. Each district has produced information and materials on village, case histories, activity reports, case studies and materials for education centres. A lot of documentation was generated for the Indo-Dutch Review Mission to inform the team about the programme. In recent years, attempts have been made to consolidate the reports at the State level. Another concern expressed is that village level formats for information gathering do not leave sufficient scope for qualitative information on innovative decisions/actions taken by *sanghas*.

5. **Comments and recommendations**

- 5.1. In view of the above concerns, the prime requirement seems to be an urgent focus on the *sanghas* and their future. An earnest and intensive stock taking of the true status of sanghas is imperative on an immediate basis, beginning with an objective assessment of their strengths and weaknesses, followed by planning of future inputs and strategic interventions. For this appropriate parameters and methodology have to be developed, to conduct the exercise across the programme districts. The understanding of the programme functionaries and the *sanghas* themselves of the concept of collective empowerment versus the strengthening of Sakhis has to be thrashed out and transferred with clarity.
- 5.2. Inter-sangha strengthening and intra-sangha networks have to be developed through capacity building processes so as to generate both mobility and cross-sangha sharing of learning and ideas. Federation of *sanghas* at the cluster level could be developed and Block level discussions facilitated.
- 5.3. The involvement and participation of the larger community of women has to be given attention.
- 5.4. The sanghas are poised to absorb all kinds of information and material apart from that developed for health and law and *nari adalats*. They require simple and ready to use information on government schemes and programmes, issues

affecting their lives, panchayat and local governance, environment, economic empowerment, thrift and credit, financial management etc. These need to be developed in workshops with them, in relation to what they are handling, otherwise there will be a gap between their need and information supply. Of course, materials would be required in relation to the training they need in the course of their strengthening as powerful autonomous collectives.

- 5.5. Sangha strengthening ideas have been expressed in some of the District reports, particularly Rajkot and Sabarkantha. In this context, the need to move away from practical needs that emerge at the village level more and more towards strategic gender/development interests requires emphasis.
- 5.6. It is suggested that Banaskantha be given particular and concerted attention, as it seems weak in many respects.
- 5.7. The programme at this juncture, after entry into the second phase, certainly requires a human resources development strategy to achieve the goals of MS and to accelerate the whole process of energising sanghas towards empowerment. In this process no functionary at any level can be left out. Capacity building will generate a new dynamism as well as redefine roles and responsibilities of the State Office, the DIUs, sahyoginis, teachers/instructors, Sakhis as well as *sangha* women.
- 5.8. This would also imply re-structuring of interventions in the context of sustainability and operational autonomy at the field level, thereby altering the present frame of programme operations. The capacity building required is as follows:

Sanghas: capacity development for understanding issues, developing linkages and networks, learning self monitoring and self management of activities and interventions, critical thinking and analytical skills.

Teachers: MS perspective/ philosophy, curriculum development, preparation of teaching-learning materials, their use, classroom transaction, management of resources of centre/BSK/MSK.

Sahyoginis: MS perspective/ philosophy/ goal and vision, management of resources and interventions at cluster/block level, organising, planning and reporting skills with critical understanding of issues in their areas and their relationship with larger networks and movements, understanding their own role change in the context of changing needs of sanghas and skills to elicit response and give training. The Sahyoginis have to be trained to always keep a step ahead of the sanghas in terms of their (sanghas') expectations in order to overcome the feeling of stagnation that they are undergoing presently.