

## **A Critical Study of Mahila Samakhyas as a Movement for Feminist Identity in North India**

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### **Abstract**

Mahila Samakhya programme was launched in 1988 in pursuance of the goals of the New Education Policy (1986) and the Programme of Action as a concrete programme for the education and empowerment of women in rural areas, particularly of women from socially and economically marginalized groups. Mahila Samakhya programme is working for the empowerment of rural women. This study seeks to assess the goal, objectives, roles and responsibilities of Mahila Samakhya program. This study is also highlighting the impact of MS on the status of feminist identity in rural India. The study resulted that MS program is playing a positive role in the development of educational, social, economical and individual status of women of rural India. Mahila Samakhya through its various program strengthened the interest of improving identity and self-confidence and legal awareness among rural women.

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Women constitute almost half of the population in the world. But the hegemonic masculine ideology made them suffer a lot to get equal opportunities in different parts of the world. Women on the whole are a 'depressed class in term of literacy. Regional imbalances in women's education are a persisting since independence. Superstitions and false beliefs inhibit literacy. Women are seen as a definite target group for the simple reason that all over the world, literacy rate among women are lower than men. If women are equal part of the developmental process, literacy among women must increase. The seven countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) had observed 1990 as the 'year of the girl child'. India also gave attention towards the uplift the women status in the society. Many programs in India were started with definite target. Mahila Samakhya programme is one of those programme.

Mahila Samakhya programme was launched in 1988 in pursuance of the goals of the New Education Policy (1986) and the Programme of Action as a concrete programme for the education and empowerment of women in rural areas, particularly of women from socially and economically marginalized groups. It seeks to bring about a change in women's perception about themselves and the perception of society in regard to women's "traditional roles.

### **The objectives of the MS scheme are**

- To enhance the self-image and self-confidence of women
- Create an environment where women can seek knowledge and information and empower them to play a positive role in their own development and that of society.
- To establish a decentralized and participative mode of management.

- To enable the Mahila Sanghas to actively assist and monitor educational activities in the villages including the primary school, adult and non-formal educational centre.
- To provide women and adolescent girls with the necessary support structure and create opportunities for their education.
- To set in motion circumstances for larger participation of women and girls in formal and non-formal educational programmes.

### **Launching the programme**

Mahila Samakhya was launched as a pilot project in Karnataka, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh in 1989 with Dutch assistance. The project was extended to Andhra Pradesh at the end of 1992 and in two districts in Kerala in 1998. The effectiveness of the MS strategy in mobilising women for education has resulted in it being adopted by other basic education projects in Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Assam. The Madhya Pradesh programme closed down in 2001, but has been registered again in 2007. With the end of DPEP funding in Assam, the Assam programme was brought under the National scheme of Mahila Samakhya in 2002. After bifurcation of States, the programme presence is also in Uttaranchal (2003) and Jharkhand (2006) now. MS Societies were registered in Chhattisgarh (2006) and Madhya Pradesh (2007).

**MAHILA SAMAKHYA ACTIVITIES:-** The Mahila Sangha is the nodal point for all the activities are planned. It provides a platform where women can meet, be together and discuss their problems. The Sahayoginis look after a group of 10 villages and work as motivators, supporters and guides for the rural women group.

The foremost achievement of Mahila Samakhya is that it is the foundation for women's empowerment at the grassroots level and that it has brought about a change in the life and living of rural women. The legal awareness programme has fructified in the formation of Nari Adalats. These Nari Adalats have emerged as vocal and effective informal courts and have gained both community respect and acceptability. The Mahila Shikshan Kendras (MSKs) provide a unique learning opportunity for adolescent girls and young women. These MSKs have been designed to provide quality education courses with innovative methodology and skills development programmes to facilitate women and adolescent girls to continue their education. The programme is at present being implemented in 21707 villages in 83 districts of Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Karnataka, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Bihar, Assam and Jharkhand. MS is running successfully in various districts of India. To ascertain its present status, effect and effort for women empowerment this study has been taken.

**OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:-** The study would achieve the following objectives:

1. To study whether Mahila Samakhya program are achieving its goal and objectives, roles and responsibilities.
2. To study the role of Mahila Samakhya in the context of feminist identity.

3. To find out whether perception of women and community in regard to women's "traditional roles has undergone any change due to setting up Mahila Samakhya.

**HYPOTHESES:-** In context of above objectives, these hypotheses were formulated.

- Mahila Samakhya are working as per their objectives, role and responsibilities.
- Mahila Samakhya are making positive effect on women status in rural community.
- Mahila Samakhya is developing positive attitude among rural community towards perception of society in regard to women's "traditional roles.

**RESEARCH DESIGN** -The study is empirical and Descriptive in nature. Survey method of research has been used to conduct the study.

**SAMPLE:-**Through **Purposive Sampling** five districts were selected from the three states of North India .30% of the Blocks covered by MS were selected through **Random Sampling**. Next 30% of the villages were selected through **Lottery method of Random sampling** from the list of villages woman of these villages were chosen by **Incidental Sampling**. The plan for the Sample selection is shown below.

**TABLE 1-Selected Districts, Blocks, Villages and Local community bodies**

Sl. No.	Selected District	State	Selected Blocks	Villages	women	Local community (rural men)
1.	Allahabad,	UP	04	10	5026	4012
2.	Varanasi	UP	04	10		
3.	bhabhua	Bihar	04	10		
4.	Gaya	Bihar	02	10		
5.	Porigarwal	Uttarakhand	02	10		

**PREPERATION OF MEASURING TOOLS:** these tools were prepared.

- Attitude scale to assess community perception regarding women's "traditional roles.
- Questionnaire to assess rural women perception towards effectiveness of Mahila Samakhya.
- Questionnaire related to the functions of Mahila Samakhya.

### MAJOR FINDINGS

The analysis, discussion and interpretation of the data collected from rural women and men of selected districts of Uttar Pradesh, leads to major findings-

Hypothesis-1-*Mahila Samakhya are working as per their objectives, role and responsibilities.*

The Data collected from the 3066 rural women with the help of *Questionnaire related to the functions of Mahila Samakhya* was tabulated and statistically treated to obtain results.

Table-2  
**Functions of Mahila Samakhya**

	<b>FUNCTIONS</b>	Positive response % age	Negative Response % age
1	Mahila Sangha has been constructed in the village.	100	00
2	All relative members perform their respective duties	65.67	34.33
3	Mahila Sangha hold meeting in every weekend.	84.33	15.00
4	Mahila Sangha do efforts to create awareness related to education among rural girls and women.	83.00	17.00
5	Sahayoginis give support to women to put up their problem.	52.67	47.33
6	Compaigns for women awareness has been organized.	52.90	47.10
7	Sahayoginis motivate girl and women for their education.	98.33	1.67
8	Nari Adalat is working for rural women	100	00
9	Nari Adalat give legel support and knowledge.	83.00	17.00
10	legal awareness programme are organized by Nari Adalats	86.00	14.00
11	Sahayoginis made contact to with parents related to out of school girls.	77.33	22.67
12	Mahila Shikshan Kendra have been operationalized.	64.00	36.00
13	Mahila Shikshan Kendras (MSKs) provide a unique learning opportunity for adolescent girls	72.83	27.17
14	MSKs provide condensed quality education courses with innovative methodology	73.33	22.67
15	MSKs organized skills development programmes to equip the women and adolescent girls to continue their education	100.00	00
16	MSKs organized program for rural women and girl to attain life-skills.	73.67	26.33
17	Health awareness program have been organized	80.83	19.17
18	Savings and economic programmes have been organized	100.00	00
19	Kishori Kendras are working for for girls who have either never beento school or have left school	88.67	10.33

**Table-2 reflects responses of rural women on various functions of Mahila samakhya program. The entire respondents accepted that Mahila Sangha has been constructed in the village.**

- 96.94% of respondents accepted that all relative members of Mahila Sangha perform their respective duties.
- 60% of respondents agreed that Mahila Sangha related meetings were held in every weekends frequently .
- About 83% of respondents reported that Mahila samakhya makes effort to create awareness related to schools among adolescent girls. About half of the respondents (53%) viewed that Manch tries to create educational awareness

among adolescent girls and their parents. They also reported that their parents were consulted to know the reason of their daughter absenteeism.

- About 55% of the respondents accepted that forum tries Sahayoginis give support to women to put up their problem.
- 89% of adolescent girls accepted Campaigns for women awareness has been organized.
- 52.67 of the women accepted that Sahayoginis motivate girl and women for their education.
- Cent percent rural women accepted that Nari Adalat is working for rural women right and Nari Adalat give legal support and knowledge.
- More than 86% of the respondents reported that legal awareness programme are organized by Nari Adalats to make them aware of domestic violence and sexual harassment.
- 77% of the respondents proclaimed that they have been contacted by Sahayoginis to support their girls education.
- About 64% of the village women accepted that Mahila Shikshan Kendra are running.
- More than 72% of the respondents accepted that these Kendras (MSKs) provide a unique learning opportunity for dropout adolescent girls and it also provides condensed quality education courses with innovative methodology.
- 73.67% of the respondents accepted that MSKs organized skills development programmes to equip the women and adolescent girls to continue their education and these kendras also organized program for rural women and girl to attain life-skills.
- More than 80% of the respondents accepted that Health awareness program have been organized for them.
- 84% of the rural parents accepted that Savings and economic programmes have been organized to make them aware of career opportunities.
- 88% of the adolescent girls proclaimed that Kishori Kendras are working for girls who have either never been to school or have left school and they make efforts to support girls and women education.

Through the results reflection we can conclude that Mahila Samakhya are working as per their objectives, role and responsibilities.

**Hypothesis-2-*Mahila Samakhya are making positive effect on women status in rural community.***

- ➔ The Data collected from the 3066 rural women with the help of *Questionnaire to assess rural women perception towards effectiveness of Mahila Samakhya* was tabulated and statistically treated to obtain results.

**TABLE-3**  
**Rural women perceived effectiveness of Mahila Samakhya**

S.N.	Items	Yes (%)	No (%)
1	You like the work of Mahila samakhya	55.00	45.00
2	Mahila Sangha are a platform to make rural women self dependent	79.15	20.85

3	Impressed by activities of Mahila samakhya.	71.52	28.48
4	Mahila samakhya formation has improved self confidence.	54.00	46.00
5	Mahila samakhya helps women in understanding one another.	46.01	53.99
6	Manch provided a platform for expression of thoughts and views.	61.00	40.00
7	Sangha is developing awareness among girls towards themselves.	72.68	27.32
8	Due to formation of Sangha health related problems are easily taken into care.	60.95	39.05
9	Group discussions in Sangha has made get rid from hesitation.	49.16	50.84
10	Sangha made positive attitude towards them.	60.00	40.00
11	Sangha is creating awareness of health among rural adolescent girls.	56.02	43.98
12	Mahila samakhya is a new start for women empowerment till adolescent.	50.30	49.70
13	Formation for Kishori Kendras created affection towards school.	50.81	49.19
14	Kishori Kendras helps in creating awareness towards education among rural girls.	68.20	31.80
15	Kishori Kendras is helpful in changing negative attitude of rural community toward girls.	52.44	45.56
16	Mahila samakhya motivates adolescent girls to live better life.	70.07	29.93
17	Nari Adalat created sensitization towards women related problems.	72.72	27.28
18	Nari Adalat created sensitization towards evils like child marriage and dowry system.	70.44	29.56
19	Nari Adalat is developing appropriate understanding of Rights and Laws for women.	66.89	33.11
20	Nari Adalat creates confidence for using own right.	47.87	52.13
21	Mahila sangh made able to perceive problems related to rural community.	50.25	49.75
22	Mahila Shikshan Kendra enforce rural adolescent girls to be self dependent in future.	72.72	27.28
23	Mahila Sangha increased confidence in expressing and solving their problems.	72.84	25.16
24	Mahila Shikshan Kendra is motivating adolescent girls to unite and solve their problems related to education.	64.31	35.69
25	Mahila Sangha group formulation has uplift status in rural women community.	48.87	51.13
26	Mahila Shikshan Kendra formulation has motivated Parents to continue their daughter's education.	60.54	39.46
27	Mahila samakhya is bringing awareness among rural parents towards women rights.	72.00	28.00
28	Various aspects related to cleanliness and hygiene has been focused towards rural women	67.88	32.12

**Table-3 indicates a majority of rural women perceived that Mahila Samakhya is effective for them. 54% of the respondents agreed that they are impressed by the activities of MS and they like to be as Meena.**

- 54% of the women viewed that Mahila Sangha has improved their self confidence. About half of the respondents (46.01%) viewed that Sangha helped them in understanding one another.
- About 61% of the women realized that Sangha provided a platform for expressing their thoughts and views.
- Majority of the respondents (73%) felt that Sangha is effective for developing renaissance towards them selves.
- 61% of the adolescent girls and women accepted that Sangha is playing an effective role in solving health related problems.
- About half of the respondents (49.16%) accepted that due to increase in communication with others, Sangha has made them to get rid of hesitation.
- About 59% of the respondents agreed that sangha has developed positive attitude towards them.
- 56% of respondents accepted that Mahila samakhya activities are creating awareness of towards need of good health.
- 51% of the respondent agreed Mahila samakhya is a new start for women empowerment from adolescent age.
- About 54% of adolescent girls viewed that formation of Kishori kendra created affection towards schools.
- 69% of respondents viewed that Kishori kendra set up helped in creating awareness towards importance of education for girls in rural areas.
- Although majority of the respondents (54%) viewed that Kishori kendra is helpful in changing attitude towards them but parental perception towards education of daughter is quite different. **32% of the respondents accepted that women are still treated unequal to men because we ourselves hold traditional notions about our positions.**
- A majority of respondents (70%) accepted that Mahila samakhya motivates them to live better life but **30% viewed that the ultimate aim of rural parent is to acquaint their daughters with the house hold work.** Shilpi & Sanwal (2002) reported that **Upbringing of girls starts with the notion that they are the temporary members of the family.**
- About 74% of respondents revealed that Nari Adalat is creating sensitization towards women's related problems.
- 73% of the girls accepted that Nari Adalat is creating awareness towards evils like child marriage and Dowry System. Bhatti (1988) reported that **parent perceive that more education the girl, the more difficulty it would be to find groom.** Shilpi & Sanwal (2002) reported that **parents prefer son over daughter for old age security.** Chamana (1996) observed the fact that **the parents spend less on girl's students than boys.**
- About 67% of the respondents agreed that Nari Adalat is developing appropriate understanding of rights among girls, but 33% of them expressed that young girls are expected to do household and were left with no time and energy to do anything else. S.srivastava (2005) reported by his study that **girls or women are appreciated by all when they kill all their desires.**

- Only 48% of the respondents accepted that Nari Adalat is developing confidence to use their own rights but 52% of them expressed that resistance is very much based on the out dated beliefs that a woman’s place was inside the house and education was of no use to her.
- Half of the respondents (50%) accepted that Mahila sangh is developing ability to diagnose rural society problems but 50% of them denied.
- Majority of the respondents (73%) accepted that Mahila Shikshan Kendra is motivating them to be self dependent in future but 27% of the respondents expressed that their parents prefer education for their brother not for them. Shilpi & Sanwal (2002) reported that *most of the parent prefer to educated their son till they get employment followed by as mach as desired but not for daughters.*
- 74% of rural respondents accepted that Mahila samakhya has united them on one platform and solve their problems.
- Half of the respondent (48%) accepted that Mahila sangha group formation has helped them to uplift their status among rural woman community.
- 61% of the respondents viewed that Mahila sikshan kendra has motivated rural parents to continue their daughter education. Thind & Jaswal (2004) reported that *parent feel the problem of physical security for their girls in providing education out side the village.*
- About 72% of the respondents accepted that Mahila samakhya is bringing awareness towards women’s right in rural society.

*Through the above discussion it is clear that Mahila samakhya in rural area is helping in development of life skills in rural adolescent girls and women and also creating positive effects on girl’s education and women empowerment.*

**Hypothesis-3-Mahila Samakhya is developing positive attitude among rural community towards perception of society in regard to women’s “traditional roles.**

The Data collected from the 2660 rural community members with the help of **Attitude scale to assess community perception regarding women’s “traditional roles** was tabulated and statistically treated to obtain results.

**TABLE-4**

**Community attitude towards women traditional role**

S.N.	Items	Literate response (%)			Illiterate response (%)		
		Yes	No	Not clear	Yes	No	Not Clear
1	Mahila Samakhya works and activities impressed you.	83.00	17.00	00	83.33	16.67	00
2	Mahila Samakhya changed your perception towards girls.	47.33	52.67	00	49.50	50.50	00
3	Female child should be made literate.	52.90	47.10	00	47.33	52.67	00
4	Girls should be provided all rights like boys.	98.33	1.67	00	18.00	82.00	00
5	Girls and boys should equally be privileged.	83.00	17.00	00	25.67	00	74.25

6	Education will make a path for women empowerment	77.33	22.67	00	50.00	50.00	00
7	Education makes a women to be self dependent in the future.	82.00	18.00	00	54.00	46.00	00
8	Educated women give support to family as of men.	72.83	27.17	00	43.00	57.00	00
9	Educating girls gives fame to the family.	73.33	22.67	00	43.00	57.00	00
10	Women should be motivated to raise their problems.	100.00	00	00	74.88	24.17	00
11	Educated girl makes her family to feel proud.	73.67	26.33	00	45.00	55.00	00
12	Education makes women competent in realizing good and bad.	80.83	19.17	00	33.33	25.00	41.77
13	Educated girls are aware of their rights.	100.00	00	00	50.00	25.00	25.00
14	Availing better Education is girls right.	80.83	19.17	00	51.00	25.00	24.00
15	Education makes women mentally strong.	74.25	25.67	00	60.00	20.00	20.00
16	Girl's education affects family status.	81.83	18.17	00	33.33	66.67	00
17	Education will be supportive to girls to be financially strong in future.	78.33	21.67	00	25.67	00	74.25
18	Family should provide proper environment women for their development	100.00	00	00	43.00	57.00	00
19	Instead of engaging girls in household works they should be sending to schools.	67.08	16.67	00	41.25	58.75	00
20	Education might make girls aware of their rights.	83.33	16.67	00	47.33	52.67	00
21	You will feel proud for educating your daughter.	100.00	00	00	50.00	17.50	32.50
22	Family ought to be aware of girls and women right	80.83	19.17	00	18.00	82.00	00
23	Educated women educate whole family.	69.67	34.33	00	49.50	50.50	00
24	Government's effort for improving girl's education and women empowerment should be supported.	100.00	00	00	83.33	16.67	00

*Above table 4 reflects the view of literate or illiterate of parents regarding women empowerment and identity.*

- Majority of the literate person agree in the education of girls. About 83% of the literate men were impressed by the activities of Mahila samakya.
- Education has positively affected the attitude of literate parents and about 52.90% parents were agreeing with education of female child. While 52.67% of illiterate parents were disagree with education of their girl child and they don't think that the education would be fruitful for her future. This reflects the traditional attitude towards female child education.
- Cent percent literate person were agreed about with girl's education that is fruitful for her future. A majority of respondents (98.33%) are agreeing that all right like boy should be provided to the girls.. Views about equal treatment to boys and girls, about 83% of literate parents were agreed while 74.25% illiterate parents are disagreeing. ***All this reflects that the literacy of the parents and the girls' education are positively correlated but illiteracy of parents and views about female child education are negatively correlated.***
- All 100% of the literate persons agreed that women should be motivated to raise their problems and education makes them to be aware of their rights. But in the case of illiterate parents only 50% to 74.83% were agree with this view, while 81% of the literate parents viewed that education to women would make them to take decision and able to differentiate between good are bad.
- 81% of the literate parents were agreeing with this view that their families are proud of girl education.
- All 100% literate and 47% illiterate parents were agree with the view that the better education is rights of girls and through education they can get better life and mentally strong and about 40% of both literate and illiterate parents were disagree with this view.
- The education of the girls and women affects the family status and helps them to be financially strong, According to illiterate parents domestic works is supposed to be main work of the girls rather than at a job outside the home where educational qualification are required.
- All the 100% literate men agreed that women should be provided opportunity for development in proper environment rather than child marriage,
- 59% of the illiterate person viewed that domestic works are more important for girls rather than to send them to school but 69% of literate parents were agree with the view of sending female child to school rather than engaging them in domestic works. About 83% to 100% of the literate persons agreed with the view that education will develop awareness among girls towards their rights in future.
- 81% of the literate parents were conscious towards their daughter's education while 82% of the Illiterate parents were not conscious towards their daughter's education. 66% literate parents agreed that the educated women educate whole family but about 50% of illiterate parents disagreed with this view. All 100% literate parents accepted that government's efforts are necessary for support girl's and women empowerment.
- Barriers in female education range from attitudinal to social, economic to political. Comparatively they are experienced more by the women belonging to rural and tribal areas, backward communities. ***One of the primary reasons responsible for the***

*gender gap in education is literacy and illiteracy of the parents. Only a literate parent can understand the importance of education for girl.*

**SUGGESTIONS BY THE RESEARCHER-** Mahila Samakhya is actually collectives of rural women like a NGO which have been closely associated and evolved into a forum, where they meet to share their inner most thoughts with no reservations and plan to turn their dreams into reality and they discuss their daily joys and sorrows, their successes and failures, their achievement and disappointment to frame their future life. Yet there are many problems, which are affecting the influence of Mahila Samakhya. This forum could be more effective if we take up some other efforts step by step like proper funding, monitoring and supervision of their effectiveness.

The programme is a unique one which focuses on the education, social and economic upliftment of the status of women, who have been left out of the educational, social and economic system. The experience of the programme over the past fourteen years, in different regional contexts, has validated the MS approach as an effective means to mobilise and organise women, and in enabling them to take charge of their lives. This has resulted in many other sectoral programmes seeking to link with MS or adopt/adapt MS strategies. In all the states where it has been implemented it is running effectively. The programme informed strategies adopted in other countries of Africa and Asia. The Mahila Samakhya Programme was awarded the honorary literacy award of UNESCO in 2001.

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