

DPEP: Mahila Samakhya Interface  
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# DPEP:Mahila Samakhya Interface

## **Backdrop for the interface**

Integrating gender perspective has been a focal point for interventions across the educational system in India. Several basic education projects in the country from 1990 onwards have focused on alleviating the distortions of the past and providing an edge to the education and empowerment of girls and women. Empowerment-oriented strategies for women with a clear focus on education were piloted first through programmes like Mahila Samakhya.

The Mahila Samakhya approach and strategies have to a large extent already been accepted by the first generation education projects such as the Bihar Education Project, Lok Jumbish in Rajasthan and the Uttar Pradesh Basic Education Project. The District Primary Education Programme, the latest entrant in the field of basic education, has also tapped the experience of MS.

Both MS and DPEP are run by the Education Department at the national and state levels.

## **Mahila Samakhya**

Launched in 1988, Mahila Samakhya is one of the most successful efforts within the government sector to link women's empowerment with education. Mahila Samakhya views education as an on-going process of empowerment, which transcends mere literacy. The programme is operational in 17 districts, spread over four states: Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh.

## **The Samakhya Approach**

The Samakhya approach begins with the understanding that women must identify their problems and solutions at their own pace. This vision of the Mahila Samakhya (MS) experience, it is believed, holds lessons for DPEP. MS has been able to establish the validity of a gender-sensitive approach to women's education based on the priorities and felt needs of rural women as articulated by them.

### **Rationale for the Interface**

MS assistance and expertise has had a powerful impact on DPEP gender policies and strategies during the past two years. MS insights and support have strengthened the gender focus within DPEP. MS resource personnel from the States/districts and the National Resource Group have interacted and influenced DPEP plan formulation and strategies.

Both programmes share similar objectives. DPEP and MS are already geographically overlapping in 12 districts. With the DPEP expansion expected to cover nearly all existing MS districts, convergence is a very important factor for both programmes.

20 months into implementation of DPEP, it seemed appropriate for both programmes to take stock of what had been their experience and for spelling out the possibilities of interaction.

For this a one-day dialogue between State Project Directors was planned. The interface on July 11, 1996 examined the possibilities of a relationship between the two engendered education programmes: The District Primary Education Programme and Mahila Samakhya.

### ***Gender Focus Within DPEP***

*The programme is being implemented in districts where female literacy rate is below the national average and the Total Literacy Campaigns have successfully generated a demand for elementary education.*

*DPEP has a marked gender focus with all planning and implementation processes sensitized to meet the special needs of girls education and women's empowerment.*

*DPEP also seeks to:*

- *Encourage the involvement of local communities, particularly women, in all decision-making processes.*
- *Make the educational system more sensitive and responsive to the needs of girls and women.*
- *Enable women to demand education for themselves and their daughters.*

*Manage the process of bringing about change in the educational systems.*

### **Participants**

State-level decision-makers from both programmes participated in this day-long programme. The dialogue moved from policy to practice

and back. The project directors of Mahila Samakhya societies in Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar participated. DPEP was represented by Madhya Pradesh; Maharashtra; Kerala; Haryana; Assam and Tamil Nadu. The State Project Director of the Bihar Education Project also participated. The interaction was facilitated by the national office of MS and the TSG gender unit.

### **The Interface**

Mr. R.S. Pandey, Joint Secretary, DPEP, highlighted the linkages which geography and common programme ideals have created between the two programmes and hoped they would be strengthened further. For while MS has a much broader focus, both programmes seek to prioritize the catalyzing grassroot level processes. He asked that the group identify the safeguards MS requires to maintain its autonomy while at the same time understand why such safeguards are sought. He also wanted MS to examine the factors inhibiting its expansion and how they could be addressed.

The Samakhya philosophy is rooted in the strength women derive from being active members of groups. Village women's collectives, the sanghas, are the propeller of the programme. The Sahayogini, who facilitates 10 sanghas, plays the role of catalyst. While the programme in all six states has had a different trajectory, in each case education was demanded by the women.

The MS approach needs both time and space especially in the initial years to bring women together in sanghas.

MS strategies for mobilization of women and their active participation in community activities, and local decision-making including educational for were also brought out in the presentation. Women's efforts to establish local accountability of the schools, to play an active role in the management of ECCE and NFE centres and schools, support teachers and participate in panchayat/VEC for were highlighted as areas where MS expertise could benefit larger education programmes.

### **The Emerging Relationship**

The discussion on areas of concern and the identification of issues on which the two programmes can learn from each other, set the stage for a free wheeling dialogue on how to strengthen the relationship.

The first are those States where Samakhya was operational and DPEP was launched later such as Karnataka and now Gujarat.

In Karnataka, the two programmes overlapped in Raichur. However with the expansion of both DPEP to another 6 districts and MS to another three, there will be total geographical convergence. In Gujarat

so far both programmes have been launched in Banaskantha district. In Andhra Pradesh, even though no districts have overlapped, Karimnagar, where DPEP is now starting, will be included in the next phase of expansion.

In these states and districts the larger basic education programmes have benefited a great deal from the already existing MS programme.

The second set is of States which have opted to launch Samakhya through DPEP: Madhya Pradesh and Assam.

In Assam and MP, conscious support from the DPEP state office and the state government concerned has helped in ensuring a clear articulation of the reason for initiating MS as well as enabled and guaranteed its autonomous structure.

Samakhya personnel at district and sub-district levels have helped in mobilising communities. This process has worked to the mutual benefit of both organisations. The TLC and later the DPEP environment building campaigns, set the stage for the entry of MS. Setting up Sanghas and getting women to analyse and articulate their concerns became that much easier.

Since the agendas are often the same as are the strategies, DPEP will have to ensure that MS is not overloaded.

Finally, there are DPEP states which have opted to take on board the Samakhya experience and evolve a variant of MS, such as Maharashtra. DPEP Maharashtra has adopted many of the Mahila Samakhya approaches in the Mahila Prabodhan Programme (MPP) launched as part of DPEP. MPP is operational in all 5 districts.

A variation to this is the earlier experience of the Bihar Education Project. Since 1991, the Mahila Samakhya approach has been adopted by BEP.

The BEP experience has shown that a basic education project can help start MS by creating enough space within the larger programme. This has enhanced BEP's understanding of gender concerns and helped strengthen both girl child specific and integrated strategies.

The BEP-MS relationship has now reached a crucial stage. The MS programme has developed a distinct identity, which has generated specific requirements in terms of responsive management and decentralised decision making. There is currently an active dialogue within MS-BEP on what shape and structure the future relationship should take.

### **Differences in Approach**

The discussion which followed highlighted that despite common aims and similarities, there are many who believe that in certain ways, DPEP and MS are entirely different programmes. There is of course a

difference in target groups. While DPEP reaches out to children, especially girls, seeking to ensure they come into and stay in schools, MS involves women in its activities, views literacy as one of the skills which will help women empower themselves.

### **Concerns**

*The basic definition of education means different things for DPEP and Mahila Samakhya. Whereas in DPEP it means getting children into primary school, keeping them there, and ensuring they learn the three Rs, in Mahila Samakhya education means an on going process of empowerment which is more than mere literacy.*

- *In DPEP there is an overall EFA framework and goals to be achieved in terms of enrolment, retention and achievement levels for the children of primary school going age. DPEP in a way is a strategy for achieving these goals.*
- *Mahila Samakhya while it also lays stress on local planning, responds as a programme to the set of priorities and pace set by the village women themselves. The education emerges on their agenda, rather than gets superimposed from outside. This process cannot be rushed, is respected by the programme facilitators and is one of the significant non-negotiables of Mahila Samakhya project management.*
- *DPEP takes a holistic view of educational development while Mahila Samakhya is more overtly women centred and works with women's groups on their issues and strategies.*
- *Mahila Samakhya management is gender sensitive and nearly all decision making positions are with women. While committed to gender sensitive administration, the number of women in decision making positions in DPEP is not the only yardstick.*

*Project management in Mahila Samakhya has necessarily established deep and lasting linkages with the voluntary sector. While DPEP also enjoys this flexibility, it has remained even now more dependent on government structures and systems.*

- *A principal concern now emerging is that expansion of MS cannot be on par with DPEP given the very different processes and time frames.*

## ***Working Together***

*There are equal if not more pros to the MS-DPEP relationship. With both programmes tracing their mandate and vision from the National Policy of Education '86 and its Programme of Action '92, the programmes are high priority in the Department of Education, Ministry of HRD, Government of India. Both programmes are run through committed Government of India funds and are coordinated in the DPEP Bureau which deals with externally aided programmes.*

*Both Ms and DPEP share a common vision of Education for All by the turn of the century and each in its own way is contributing to the enormous task of achieving UEE.*

*MS and DPEP give primacy to participatory planning and implementation and prefer to work closely with village communities, parents/guardians and other stakeholders so that there is local ownership and decentralized management. Thus both programmes recognise that process is as important as reaching quantified targets and that local partnerships must be nurtured.*

*With DPEP progress is measured in quantifiable terms against previously set targets rather than the seemingly non-target driven, more qualitative assessment of empowering processes in Samakhya. Every sangha generates its own targets and their nature depends on the milieu. This sangha-centred approach is akin to what DPEP aims for, in the long term.*

*The two programmes are committed to ensure that the educational system responds to the special needs of girls and women both through supply side interventions and also by demand creation in local groups.*

*Project management strategies at state level are similar in DPEP and MS state programmes where they have registered autonomous societies with decision making bodies like the executive committees and General Council.*

*MS management practices and structures which are gender sensitive and facilitative rather than directorial, have some important lessons for DPEP structures.*

MS tends to look to the women's movement for ideas and support and portrays itself as a women's empowerment or education programme. DPEP because of its very different scale and time schedule remains skeptical of this effort, where results are difficult to quantify.

Mahila Samakhya project directors pointed out that education has become the priority and is the agenda as set by Sanghas. In Samakhya, education is more than the ability to read and write, it is the inculcation of the ability to think about a situation and realize one's own potential to change it for the better. For this the ability to read and write is a pre-requisite and treated as such.

In MS, the concern is with seeing the system through women's eyes and catalyzing changes, at a pace decided by the women themselves as manifested through the sanghas.

This approach, while not unique, is still to be fully accepted within programmes like DPEP, which work as part of the regular educational system. DPEP has found that while integration of gender in all aspects of programme design and implementation is the aim, they have had to work out women-specific strategies. They have looked to Samakhya to lead the way.

### **Establishing MS**

The afternoon session concentrated on demystifying the procedures of establishing the Mahila Samakhya programme. Sr. Sujitha, Ms. J. Kameshwari and Ms. Nishi Mehrotra shared the experiences of establishing Samakhya societies.

Modalities of procurement and reimbursement through DPEP and MS were clarified. As part of the Memorandum of Understanding signed between the two societies, the autonomy and the safeguards required for MS processes are ensured. The annual action plan of Mahila Samakhya and the budget are passed by the EC of MS and funds are made available once in six months from the NGO grant scheme of DPEP. However, MS societies are not covered by the regular supervision mechanism of DPEP.

### **Outcomes and Recommendations**

The day-long meeting brought to the fore both the concerns and the potentials of an emerging DPEP-MS relationship.

As a result of this interface, Kerala expressed interest in launching a Mahila Samakhya programme. DPEP Maharashtra which is implementing the Mahila Prabodhan Programme, in all five districts now plans to launch MS in one of the expansion districts perhaps through NGO involvement. The State Project Director of Tamil Nadu and another participant for DPEP, Tamil Nadu also attended, to learn

more about Mahila Samakhya with a view to implementing similar strategies.

Some of the salient issue for convergence and cooperation emerged.

### **How DPEP can benefit**

- It was suggested that DPEP could learn from the MS training processes. MS, over the years has evolved a cadre of trainers who are capable of providing the recurrent, systematised gender sensitisation trainings required at all levels of the DPEP programme.
- MS has evolved tried and tested effective strategies for mobilisation of women and their active participation in community affairs, including educational issues. DPEP can seek to adopt these strategies for community mobilisation, specially for setting up women's groups. DPEP could rather converge with existing MS programmes for the purpose.
- DPEP could learn from MS methodologies on how to evolve local educational interventions based on women's needs and priorities in a holistic manner. Effective convergence in meeting local requirements for non-formal and alternative systems of education, early childhood care, girls participation in schools and teacher/school management can be made to include the active participation of local women.
- MS strategies to mobilise and build an informed body of opinion amongst women for education can help develop a pressure group for more gender sensitive agendas in the village community. As DPEP too is in the process of setting up VECs, with a defined role and mandate, learning from the experience of Sanghas can be useful. The Sangha-VEC linkage would strengthen the agenda and interactions of both.
- In other states, where mother— teacher councils or PTAs are functional, women sangha members can also be made part of these councils/associations.
- In areas where geographical convergence with DPEP exists or can be created, Sangha women can actively participate in educational management, monitoring and running of pre-schools and non-formal education centres.
- MS trainings to build capacities in project personnel, especially field based workers like Sakhis and Sahayoginis, can prove useful for DPEP. Personnel like the Sanchalikas in MPP of Maharashtra, preraks/teachers motivators, even community



workers for NGOs working with DPEP etc. could be provided training using MS methodologies.

- MS networks with grassroots NGOs and other support organisations is effective and has greatly benefited the content and outreach of the programme. DPEP could benefit from these linkages for both capacity building and wider resource support for girls and women's education.

### **MS could also gain from other basic education programmes in several ways**

The MS programme can benefit a great deal from the pedagogical renewal processes initiated and being consolidated under DPEP.

- DPEP should actively consider supporting Mahila Shikshan Kendras which are a unique educational institution evolved in the MS programme.
- Cluster Resource Centres set up in DPEP can be an arena for MS-DPEP training and joint meetings and for better field level coordination and facilitation of village centred and processes.
- MS can play its role as catalyst and create a wider outreach in tandem with DPEP, provided its processes are fully safeguarded by an undertaking with the DPEP programme.
- At state level there will need to be effective coordination between both programmes. DPEP must clearly articulate its support for MS and its processes.
- It emerged that DPEP and MS need to work out mutually supportive relationship with a clear understanding of possible convergence areas, to reduce any scope of overloading or unreal expectations from each other.

The dialogue helped crystallise issues at the project management level and created the necessary opening for decentralised dialogue.