

1. Introduction

The most important goal for the international community in the beginning of the 21st century is the alleviation of poverty. The Millennium Development Goals sets “Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger” as Goal 1 and targets to “reduce by half the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day.” Relentless efforts have been made globally to uplift the poor in order to achieve the target by 2015.

Conventional poverty alleviation projects take the form of service delivery, such as provision of housing, employment, vocational skills training and small loans. In addition to these services, empowerment becomes an important component in enabling the poor to break away from the cycle of poverty by increasing their capabilities. Empowerment is a process in which the weak in society gain physical, psychological, social, economic and political power. The power of which these people are deprived differs, depending on the context in which they live. Therefore, the process of empowerment is not uniform, and as a result, so are the types of intervention.

Empowerment, together with gender mainstreaming, is also a key word in gender and development, following the fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. It goes without saying that empowerment is a focal point for any on-going projects for women. Various approaches have been adopted to empower women, ranging from health projects for physical empowerment and education projects for social empowerment, to income generation projects for economic empowerment.

Presently, the most popular approach is to empower women economically, since economic empowerment of women certainly contributes to poverty reduction. At the same time, it is reported that by gaining economic power, women gain confidence and develop psychologically, and their status in the family and community subsequently improves. This is why projects for women, such as literacy education, vocational training and family planning, are increasingly combined with micro credit, following the success of the Grameen Bank project.

As opposed to this trend, the Mahila Samakhya Programme, which is conducted by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, the Government of India, adopts a problem-solving approach to empower women through education. Targeting women of low social classes in rural areas, the programme intends to create an environment where women and girls can avail themselves of educational opportunities without difficulty. Women in rural villages, who are organised into groups, learn and take actions to remove obstacles which stand in the way of promoting female education.

In order to examine how women are empowered in the Mahila Samakhya Programme, this study selected Andhra Pradesh where the programme was started in 1993 by the implementing body, the Andhra Pradesh Mahila Samatha Society (APMSS),

as it is one of the states in the advanced stage of programme implementation. The number of participating women has increased from 6,403 in two districts to 171,646 in fourteen districts. Women's groups in rural villages are gradually united as larger groups and are then federated at the mandal¹ level. Twenty-eight federations of women's groups now conduct various activities independently of the Mahila Samakhya Programme.

One federation, Swatantra Bharata Mahila Sangham in Makthal mandal in Mahbubnagar district, was chosen for fieldwork, since it is one of the first two federations established in Andhra Pradesh and is very active in solving problems that women face, promoting education, and redressing gender discrimination. The federation in Makthal is considered to be a model case in the programme.

Fieldwork was conducted between 5th and 10th of January in 2011, and visits were made to the head office of the APMSS in Secunderabad, the district office in Mahbubnagar, and three programme villages in Makthal, as well as the state government office in charge of the Mahila Samakhya Programme. Information was collected from the APMSS's staff regarding the implementation of the programme and from women of the federation regarding reasons for federating and issues on which they are working. The objective was to analyse the development process from a women's group to a federation and the empowerment process of women as individuals and as groups.

This working paper consists of eight chapters. Following the introduction, chapter 2 presents an analytical framework of empowerment. Chapter 3 provides an outline of the Mahila Samakhya Programme. Chapter 4 illustrates the actual implementation of the programme in the state of Andhra Pradesh, and chapter 5 explains programme activities conducted by the APMSS. Chapter 6 contains the development process of Makthal federation and its activities on the basis of the fieldwork. Chapter 7 analyses the process of empowering women of Makthal federation and the impacts of the federation's activities on people beyond the participants. It also includes the future direction of the Makthal federation. Chapter 8 discusses the challenges that the APMSS and Makthal federation face in the implementation of the Mahila Samakhya Programme, including recommendations and conclusions.

¹ Mandal is an administrative unit below a district. It has a population of 50 to 70 thousands.

2. Analysing Approaches to Empowerment of Women

The term, empowerment, has been a buzzword in the field of development since the 1990s. However, there is no consensus on the definition, and what is perceived as empowerment among academics and practitioners varies depending on the context in which the term is used. This section will present the concept of empowerment on which this working paper is based, drawing ideas from the past studies.

2.1. Understanding empowerment

Empowerment is generally understood as “giving someone power or authority to do something.” In years past, power and authority granted were considered official. Empowerment meant that the Pope could grant secular authority to kings or feudal lords in Medieval English, and was used as a legal term, granting public authority or legal power in the 17th century (Kukita and Watanabe, 1998: 5; Ito, 2002: 241). When social reform movements, such as the civil rights and feminist movements, took place in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, the meaning was widened to include a social process of acquiring power.

This broad concept of empowerment was formalised by Paulo Freire in his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). The Latin American educationist developed a new approach to educating the illiterate, which was centred on conscientisation. While learning literacy skills, learners are encouraged to recognise their positions in society and the discrimination they face and to take action to change the situation. This approach has had great impacts on development thinking.

Chambers (1983) argues the need for learning from poor and uneducated people who are at the bottom of society in his influential book, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*. He proposes a change in priority in development policy planning. Oakley and Marsden (1984) advocate participation, by which they mean that people who are targets of projects should be able to make decisions on issues related to their lives. Amartya Sen (1999) presents the capability approach in the analysis of poverty. He argues that poverty does not concern only economic aspects and that it is necessary to pay attention to the dignity of human beings. People have to develop their capabilities to utilise their entitlements. The capability approach has been supported by international development agencies, and empowerment of the poor has become an important component in alleviating poverty.

As the concept of empowerment becomes popular and is used in various ways, its definitions become varied, since the contexts and the ways in which people are disempowered are various. There is, however, commonality. The target for empowerment is those who occupy the weakest positions in society—those who are

oppressed or are discriminated against. The objective is to achieve social justice by acquiring and protecting rights and changing relations in society. The process of empowerment includes physical, psychological, social, economic and political aspects.

In this working paper, on the basis of the previous studies, empowerment is defined as follows:

Empowerment is a process in which the socially weak gain physical, psychological, social, economic and political power in order to transform society. In the process, they acquire abilities to take action, regain confidence and dignity, are released from control by others, and become able to make decisions on their own issues.

2.2. Empowerment as an important concept in development and gender

It is said that in development and gender, the term, *empoderamiento* (empowerment in Spanish) appeared the first time at the second World Conference on Women in 1980, and was widely used at the third World Conference on Women in 1985 (Meguro, 1998; Ito, 2002). An NGO, DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era), had a great influence on shaping the concept on empowerment of women. They argued from the perspective of poor women that it is important for individual women to become capable and then act collectively, in order to participate in development processes.

In 1994, empowerment was stated in a public document for the first time in the Programme of Action adopted at the International Conference on Population and Development. Chapter 4 of the Programme of Action is devoted to Gender Equality, Equity and Empowerment of Women and begins with the statement that “The empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of their political, social, economic and health status is a highly important end in itself.”

In the following year, the Beijing Platform for Action was adopted at the fourth World Conference on Women. Its mission statement clearly mentions that “The Platform for Action is an agenda for women’s empowerment.” In the same year, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) developed new indices: Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) and Gender Development Index (GDI). Thus, since the Beijing conference, empowerment, together with gender mainstreaming, has been used as the main concept to achieve gender equality, and the means to assess progress made in countries and regions via GEM and GDI have been available.

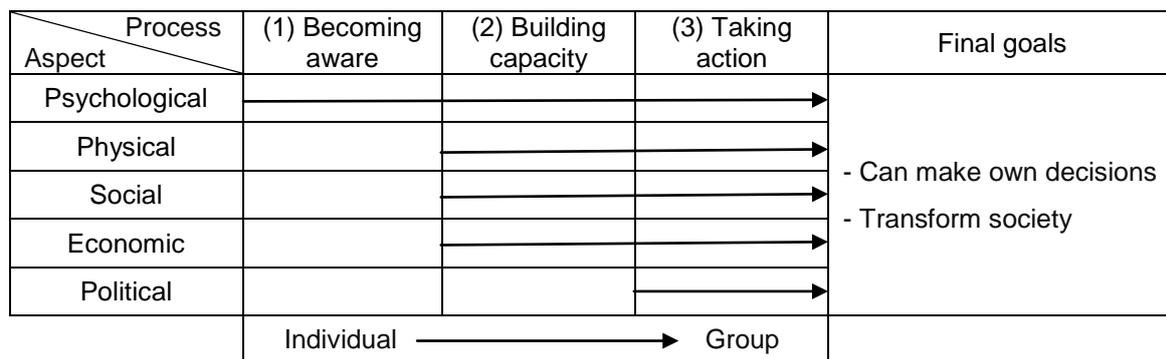
2.3. Process of and five aspects of women's empowerment

Past studies on empowerment present analytical frameworks that divide the process of empowerment into stages and look at several aspects. On the basis of the literature review, this working paper examines the empowerment of women in three stages and from five aspects, namely physical, psychological, social, economic and political (see Figure 1).

The first stage is for women to become aware of their oppression. Marginalised women often take this situation for granted and do not consider it a problem. They are not aware that they are being deprived of their rights and power. Women, who are undoubtedly accustomed to occupying an inferior position to men or elders, do not possess their own identity, but instead identify themselves by their relationship with others, such as someone's wife or someone's (usually an eldest son's) mother (Sen, 1990). For these women, the first step is to understand their position in the family structure and society and identify the reasons behind their disadvantaged situation. This is psychological empowerment.

In the next stage, women acquire the ability to take action. Many on-going projects for women take the form of delivering services: health service for their physical empowerment; literacy education to gain knowledge and information for social empowerment; and vocational skills training and micro credits to earn income for economic empowerment. In this process of acquiring knowledge and skills, women also grow psychologically. Empowered women can improve the welfare of their families and communities, for example by increasing the knowledge about nutrition or starting small enterprises. Such contribution can be acknowledged by others. At this stage, the situation demonstrates a positive-sum outcome. Few conflicts are expected between those who traditionally hold power and those who gain power.

At the third stage, women, after recognising problems and acquiring the ability to solve problems, take action to challenge the existing imbalance of power. Demand for redistribution of power is zero-sum. Those who hold power feel threatened, and those who demand power are likely to face resistance. Therefore, individual women in weak positions organise themselves and network with other stakeholders. By collective actions, they are able to voice their demands and seek participation in decision-making. Empowerment takes place in groups as well as individuals to achieve political empowerment.

Figure 1. Process of Empowerment

Source: Created by the author.

2.4. Economic approach and social approach

At present, the most popular approach to empower women is economic. One reason is that many women live in poverty and their economic empowerment is necessary. Another reason is a belief that the status of women can be increased by engaging them productive work, in particular the work by which women can bring earnings from outside the home.

A typical example of the economic approach is the Grameen Bank project in Bangladesh. Its success is internationally recognised, as shown by the fact that the founder, Muhammad Yunus was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006. The Grameen Bank aims to reduce poverty by providing micro credits to poor women and enabling them to start small businesses. These women are empowered not only economically but also socially and psychologically. It is reported, for example, that by leaving their houses and gaining confidence, women's status in villages improves (Hossain, 1988; Karl, 1995; Tsuboi, 2006).

Similar reports are made of the women of SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association) in India. The SEWA's objective is to achieve economic and social security for self-employed women. They organise themselves and negotiate with employees on wages and labour conditions, which can otherwise be difficult for individual women. The SEWA's activities have expanded from economic activities to health services, literacy education, and banking and insurance services, in accordance with the needs of its members. It is reported that women make demands, lobby and, in turn, gain political power (Bhatt, 1989; Karl, 1995; Kaida, 1998; Ito, 2002). Their empowerment takes place in economic and other aspects.

Thus, economic empowerment of women can lead to their social and political empowerment. They become able to express opinions, increase negotiation power and participate in decision-making, since their economic contribution is acknowledged by

their families and communities (Karl, 1995; Medel-Anonuevo, 1995; NWECC, 1999; Devi, 2002). However, there are arguments that women who gain economic power are not necessarily empowered in other aspects. Reportedly, women give whatever they earn to their husbands or male family members; they have no say in the use of their earnings; and the power relationship within the family does not change (Karl, 1995; Kiso, 1997; Hozumi, 1998; NWECC, 1999).

Another approach which is often used for empowerment of women is social—mainly providing literacy education. Since women account for 64% of the total number of illiterates in the world (UNESCO, 2010), literacy education is an important and urgent issue that the international community is addressing.

One of the often-used models for literacy education is the one developed by Paulo Freire, which was mentioned earlier. While people learn how to read and write the words they use in daily life, they are conscientised, recognising their oppressed and disadvantaged position in society. In this process, they also obtain the ability to analyse and solve problems, and take action. Many literacy projects report psychological and social empowerment: women become confident and proud, and gain respect from others by becoming literate (e.g. Oxenham *et al.*, 2002; Ota, 2005).

It is, however, well known that there are difficulties involved in managing adult literacy projects. Adults tend to say that they are too old to learn and that they have little time to study because they have too much work to do both inside and outside the home. Many of them lack motivation and face various constraints. Those who have never been to school have to start by learning how to hold a pen. Since they are not accustomed to sitting and studying, they may not be able to keep their concentration in literacy classes. When they do not see progresses, they may lose interest in learning.

In order to find effective ways to promote adult literacy in combination with livelihood activities, UNESCO conducted an experimental project in the latter half of the 1970s. It examined the achievements in literacy education for three types of projects: (1) from literacy education to livelihood activities; (2) from livelihood activities to literacy education; and (3) literacy education and livelihood activities in parallel. Of these, the second type was found to be the most effective (Oxenham *et al.*, 2002).

The participants in the projects were very interested in livelihood activities. When they engaged in economic activities, they realised the need for literacy skills. They were motivated to learn and were more likely to complete the literacy course. On the other hand, in the beginning the participants' interest in literacy education was low. Even though they started attending the literacy course, the incidence of dropping out was high. Therefore, many on-going literacy projects are combined with vocational training and/or provision of micro credits. Provision of economic incentives is considered to be

essential to attract learners for literacy education.

Empowerment includes physical, psychological, social, economic and political aspects, all of which have to be achieved. However, the processes to achieve these aspects of empowerment differ depending on the specific contexts in which people live. It is not possible to adopt a single universal model. For example, for women who face restrictions in their mobility due to socio-cultural and religious reasons, the economic approach of providing work outside the home may not be viable. Moreover, economic empowerment may not always lead to social and political empowerment, as mentioned earlier.

This working paper, therefore, examines the Mahila Samakhya Programme which adopts a problem-solving approach by organising women's groups. It focuses on social empowerment through education and training and does not place particular emphasis on economic activities. Nonetheless, it has been successful in political empowerment which is considered to be most difficult to achieve.

3. Outline of the Mahila Samakhya Programme

The Mahila Samakhya Programme (Education for Women's Equality) is a national programme started by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, the Government of India in 1988. It is presently implemented in ten states with the participants of approximately 800 thousands. This chapter will explain the background, characteristics, management structure and progress of the programme.

3.1. Background of the Mahila Samakhya Programme

India is a vast country, having the second largest population (1.215 billion) in the seventh largest area (328.7million km²) in the world. It is also a diverse country in terms of language, culture, religion and ethnicity. The country's economy has rapidly grown in recent years driven by the development of the service sector. In particular, the booming IT industry is now transforming the agrarian society.

The benefits of economic growth, however, have not been distributed evenly to all: 28.6% of the population live below the poverty line (UNDP, 2010); 36.6% of the people are not able to read and write and the gap in the literacy rate between men (76.9%) and women (57.4%) is one of the world's highest (UNESCO, 2010). Out of the country's 270 million illiterate, 64% are women.

Since independence, the Indian government has recognised the importance of education, as the Constitution of India states that:

“The State shall endeavour to provide, within a period of ten years from the commencement of this Constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years.” (Article 45)

The importance of female education is stated in the Article 4. (4) Equalisation of Educational Opportunity (c) of the Education Policy 1968 that:

“The education of girls should receive emphasis, not only on grounds of social justice, but also because it accelerates social transformation.”

This policy acknowledges girls as an agent of change, but does not appear to pay due attention to education of adult women. In Article 4. (14) Spread of Literacy, focus is on those who work in the public and private industrial sectors. There is no mention of women who constitute the majority of the illiterate population.

Influenced by the increasing attention on basic education in the international community in the 1980s, the Indian government formulated a new National Education Policy in 1986. It aims to redress inequality between men and women in the access to education and the learning achievement. In particular, the policy emphasises the need for meeting the needs of those who were disadvantaged in the access to educational opportunities. Education for adult women becomes one of the focus areas. In part IV of

the policy, Education for Equality, there is a section specifically for Education for Women's Equality. It mentions that:

“Education will be used as an agent of basic change in the status of women.....”
(Article 4.2); and

“The removal of women's illiteracy and obstacles inhibiting their access to, and retention in, elementary education will receive overriding priority,” (Article 4.3)

In response to this policy, a series of consultation meetings was conducted among the government, experts on education and voluntary organisations. They discussed reasons why the progress in female education was slow, and found various economic, social and cultural factors which prevented women from participating in education. One conclusion they reached was that in order for girls and women to enjoy the educational opportunities available for them, they had to be empowered.

On the basis of this recommendation, the Ministry of Human Resource Development, the Government of India decided to initiate the Mahila Samakhya Programme as a national programme in 1988. The concept of the Mahila Samakhya Programme was reinforced by the revised Education Policy 1992 and its Programme of Action. It reiterates that women's empowerment is the critical precondition for their participation in the education process.

3.2. Unique characteristics of the Mahila Samakhya Programme

The majority of education projects take the form of delivering services, such as constructing schools and operating literacy centres. In these projects, education is considered to be a means, and empowerment is considered as an end. The Mahila Samakhya Programme considers both education and empowerment, not only as an end but also as a means.

Various obstacles stand in the way of promoting female education. It is, therefore, necessary to create an environment where women and girls can learn and have access to information. The obstacles can be broken down by the hands of women who are empowered through education. Women as an agent of change can alter the mindsets of people who are not in favour of female education. In the Mahila Samakhya Programme, education is a means to empower women and an end for them to avail educational opportunities, whereas empowerment is a means for women to be educated and is an end for them to be educated.

The philosophy and principles of the Mahila Samakhya Programme show the participatory and bottom-up approach that needs to be followed at all the stages of its implementation (see Box 1). On the basis of the philosophy and principles, the programme sets seven objectives (see Box 2). It aims at empowerment of women educationally and psychologically, in order to enable them to promote female education,

Box 1. The Philosophy and Principles of the Mahila Samakhya Programme

- (1) All processes and activities within the programme must be based on respect for women's existing knowledge, experience and skills.
- (2) Every component and activity within the project must create an environment for learning, help women to experience and affirm their strengths, create time and space for reflection and respect individual uniqueness and variation.
- (3) Women and women's groups at the village level set the pace, priorities, form and content of all project activities.
- (4) Planning, decision making and evaluation processes, as well as all levels of personnel must remain accountable to the collective at the village level.
- (5) All project structures and personnel play facilitative and supportive, rather than directive roles.
- (6) A participatory selection process is followed to ensure that project functionaries at all levels are committed to working among poor women and are free from caste/community prejudices.
- (7) Management structures must be decentralised, with participative decision making and devolution of powers and responsibilities to district, block and village levels.

Source: MHRD (2009)

Box 2. The Seven Objectives of the Mahila Samakhya Programme

- (1) To create an environment in which education can serve the objectives of women's equality.
- (2) To enhance the self-image and self-confidence of women and thereby enabling them to recognise their contribution to the economy as producers and workers, reinforcing their need for participating in educational programmes.
- (3) To create an environment where women can seek knowledge and information and thereby empower them to play a positive role in their own development and development of society.
- (4) To set in motion circumstances for larger participation of women and girls in formal and non-formal education programmes.
- (5) To provide women and adolescent girls with the necessary support structures and an informal learning environment to create opportunities for education.
- (6) To enable *mahila sanghas* to actively assist and monitor educational activities in the villages—including elementary schools, adult education, Non-formal Education/Education Guarantee Scheme/Alternative and Innovative Education Centres, and other facilities for continuing education.
- (7) To establish a decentralised and participative mode of management, with the decision making powers devolved to the district level and to *mahila sanghas* which in turn will provide the necessary conditions for effective participation.

Source: MHRD (2009)

and in the end, to achieve gender equality in society.

Accordingly, the Mahila Samakhya Programme targets educationally backward areas. Two selection criteria are the low level of female literacy and the high level of scheduled caste and scheduled tribe population. The areas with these characteristics are firstly selected, and then within the areas the programme specifically targets socially and economically marginalised women in rural areas, most of who belong to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.

The Mahila Samakhya Programme has four unique characteristics. Firstly, it is process-oriented. It neither contains specific components to be followed nor sets any quantitative targets with deadlines. Women are motivated to form groups, and facilitated to identify their own problems and take collective action to solve the problems. The programme has only a broad framework of activities and provides technical and minimal financial support.

Secondly, the programme adopts a participatory and bottom-up approach as mentioned earlier, and decision-making is decentralised. Participating women are placed in the centre of the programme. They plan, implement and evaluate activities, while the programme staff facilitate and support them.

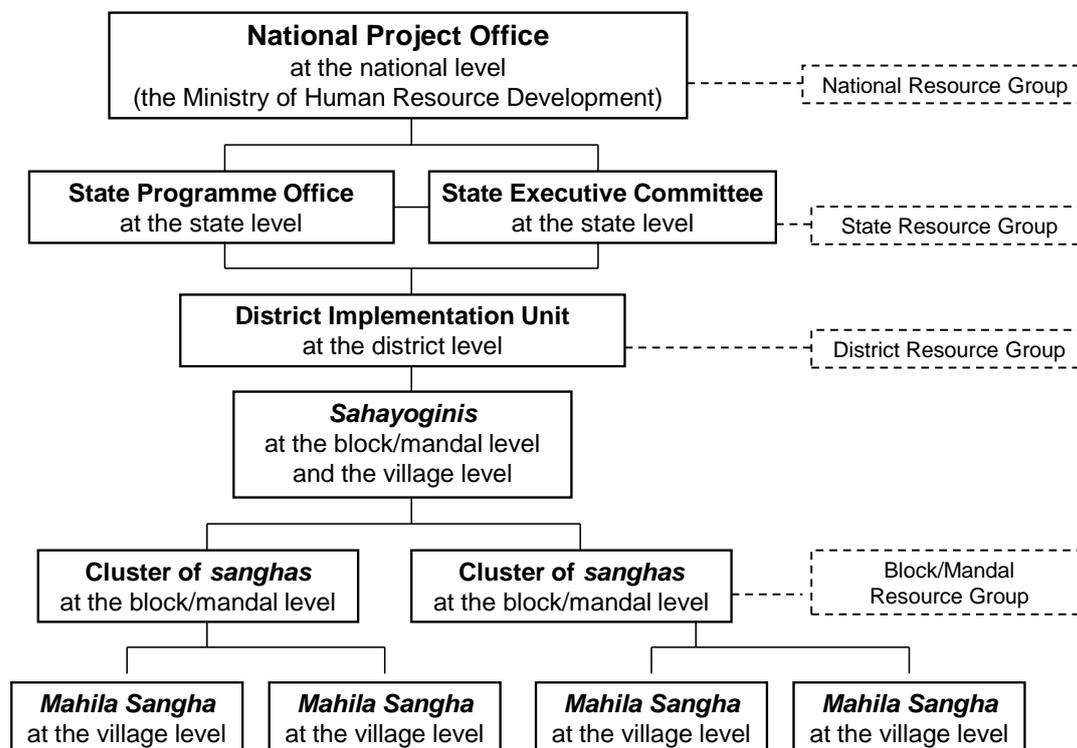
Thirdly, education constitutes one of the components of the Mahila Samakhya Programme, though it is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Human Resource Development. Moreover, education is defined in broad terms, including not only literacy skills but also life and other skills. In the process of being educated, women are expected to pose questions, critically analyse problems and seek solutions, and at the same time develop self-confidence and self-esteem. The fields of education and training are broad, including literacy, health, gender and agriculture, and are provided in various modes, such as discussion, workshops and field visits, in small to large groups.

Fourthly, the Mahila Samakhya Programme has a clear exit strategy. Groups of women are encouraged to work on their own from the onset of their participation in the programme. The programme's support to groups is gradually decreased. When groups become mature enough to conduct activities independently, the programme withdraws from the programme.

3.3. Management structure of the Mahila Samakhya Programme

In the case of national programmes, the central government of India formulates programmes and provides funding, and the state governments are responsible for implementation. Accordingly, the national programme of Mahila Samakhya is implemented at the state level. It has a well-established management structure from the national, state, district, mandal and down to the village levels (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Management Structure of the Mahila Samakhya Programme



Source: Created by the author from MHRD (2009; 2010a) and APMSS (2010c).

At the national level, the National Project Office is located in the Ministry of Human Resource Development. As an advisory body, the National Resource Group, which consists of experts on gender and development, provides advice on the programme implementation and guides the direction of the programme.

Under the broad guidance of the Ministry of Human Resource Development, the programme is independently conducted in respective states. At the state level, a registered society under the Societies Registration Act 1860² is established as the implementing body of the programme. This registered society is an autonomous body of the government. It is thought that the independent society can be flexible in administering innovative projects, while retaining a close relationship with the central, state and local governments.

The State Programme Office is headed by the State Programme Director, the representative of the registered society, and has its own office and staff. At the state level, two more parties are involved in the programme. The State Mahila Samakhya Society Executive Committee, which is comprised of representatives from the central

² These societies are non-profit organisations.

government, the National Resource Group, the state government, local NGOs and the State Programme Office, makes important decisions regarding the implementation of the programme. The State Resource Group, which comprised of resource persons, trainers and representatives of local NGOs, provides technical assistance.

In each of the operating districts, the District Implementation Unit with its own office and staff is generally established in district headquarters. When the programme area is far from the district headquarters, the office is set up in block or mandal headquarters. With a District Programme Coordinator as a head, the office consists of District Resource Persons (one each for one hundred villages), Junior Resource Persons (one each for fifty villages or one block or mandal) and *sahayoginis*³ or fieldworkers/facilitators (one each for ten villages) for programme management, and administrators and accountants. The District Resource Group, which is comprised of resource persons, trainers, district government officials, and representatives from local NGOs, serves as an advisory body.

One district is divided into clusters of *mahila sanghas*⁴ or women's groups at the block or mandal level. A cluster includes five to six groups in neighbouring villages. Some clusters are united as federations which will be explained in detail in chapter 6. At this level, two more parties exist. The Block or Mandal Executive Committee or the Federation Executive Committee is a decision-making body, and the Block or Mandal Resource Group, which consists of Junior Resource Persons (one each for every fifty villages) and Cluster Resource Persons (one each for twenty-five villages) operates as an advisory body under the supervision of the District Resource Group.

Then, at the village level, one *sangha* with twenty-five to fifty members is formed in one village, which is facilitated and monitored by one *sahayogini*.

3.4. Progress made by the Mahila Samakhya Programme

The Mahila Samakhya Programme started in three states—Gujarat, Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh—in 1989 (see Table 1). The programme was extended to Andhra Pradesh and Bihar in 1992 and Kerala in 1998. Then, it covered four more states between 2002 and 2006. As of March, 2009, the programme was conducted in 95 districts in ten states and approximately 800 thousand women participated in *sanghas*.

The five states except for Gujarat, where the programme was initiated in 1989 and

³ Nationally, the term, *sahayogini* is used for a fieldworker/facilitator in the Mahila Samakhya Programme, while the term, *karyakartha* is used in Andhra Pradesh. In order to be precise, this working paper distinguishes the usage of the two terms depending on the subject of the chapter. Chapter 3 which describes the Mahila Samakhya Programme in India as a whole uses *sahayogini* and chapters 4 to 8 which present the case of Andhra Pradesh use *karyakartha*.

⁴ Similarly, the term, *sangha* is used nationally, while *sangham* is used in Andhra Pradesh. This chapter uses *sangha* and the following chapters use *sangham*.

1992, show the progress in terms of the numbers of *sanghas*, of member women or of federations, or all of the above.⁵ Of these, only Andhra Pradesh has mandals where the Mahila Samakhya Programme has withdrawn. This suggests that the activities of the *sanghas* in Andhra Pradesh are progressing fast towards independence.

Table 1. The Coverage of the Mahila Samakhya Programme (as of March 31, 2009)

State	Starting year	No of districts	No of blocks/mandals	No of villages	No of <i>sanghas</i>	No of members	No of federations
Gujarat	1989	7	39	2,123	1,809	39,162	14
Karnataka	1989	12	51	2,798	4,531	74,796	41
Uttar Pradesh	1989	17	60	4,668	4,668	101,507	27
Andhra Pradesh	1992	14 (0)	98 (12)	3,621 (421)	2,712 (421)	117,535 (8,490)	28
Bihar	1992	13	71	5,574	5,407	114,471	9
Kerala	1998	3	9	2,588	570	19,800	0
Assam	2002	9	42	2,499	2,923	148,991	23
Uttarakhand	2003	6	21	2,377	2,377	47,659	8
Chattisgarth	2006	5	6	-----	-----	-----	0
Jharkhand	2006	9	54	3,999	8,230	126,728	13
Total		95	451	30,247	33,227	790,649	163

Sources: MHRD (2009) and Purushothaman (2010) for the number of federations

Notes: (1) ----- indicates that data is not available.

(2) The numbers inside the parentheses for Andhra Pradesh indicate the areas where the Mahila Samakhya Programme has withdrawn.

As more than twenty years have passed since the commencement of the Mahila Samakhya Programme, the positive impacts of the programme on women have been observed. Overall, the internal and external evaluation reports mention that the programme has been successful (Gulati *et al*, 2004; First Joint Review Mission, 2009; MHRD, 2010a; Purushothaman, 2010). For example, the Annual Report 2009/10 of the Ministry of Human Resource Development (2010a: 62) finds the following outcomes.

- Increase in demand for literacy education and education for children
- Participation in local governance
- Seeking accountability of government services
- Raising awareness on achieving gender-equal society

⁵ The reason that the coverage of the programme in Jharkhand is great is that the programme had already been implemented in the present areas of Jharkhand, before the state was established by being separated from the state of Bihar in 2000.

- Increasing the recognition and visibility of women in their families and communities

It appears that *sangha* women have made progress in promoting education and participating in governance, and raising awareness on gender issues, and have been empowered enough to make demands to government offices. As a result, their activities have been acknowledged by other people in the villages. Moreover, an approach to the promotion of education for adolescent girls used by the Mahila Samakhya Programme has been adopted in the national education programme, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan.⁶

The achievements of the Mahila Samakhya Programme have also been acknowledged internationally. The programme won the Noma Literacy Prize of UNESCO in 2001 for its work in empowering women to be able to address social issues which are against female education, in addition to providing them with literacy education.

There are, however, issues to be addressed. Firstly, the female literacy rate needs to be further increased. Nearly half of adult women are still illiterate in India (UNESCO, 2010). An evaluation report (First Joint Review Mission, 2009) points out that the selection criteria of the programme should be strictly applied. There are cases in which areas with very low female literacy rates have not been chosen or scheduled castes and scheduled tribes whose literacy rate are low have not been included in *sanghas*.

Secondly, it is important to reconsider effective ways to expand the programme. Without providing direct delivery of services, motivating women to form groups and maintain activities remains as a challenge. Thirdly, it is necessary to further explore the way in which *sangha* activities become more visible and have a greater impact on changes in broader society (Gulati *et al*, 2004). Bearing these issues in mind, the Mahila Samakhya Programme implemented in Andhra Pradesh will be looked into in detail in the following chapters.

⁶ This is the main national programme to make elementary education universal in India. It aims to enroll all children between six and fourteen years old and enable them to complete eight years of education by 2010.

4. The Mahila Samakhya Programme in Andhra Pradesh

A national programme, the Mahila Samakhya Programme is implemented by an independent body in each of the programme states. Andhra Pradesh was selected as the fourth target state for the programme in 1992, and the Andhra Pradesh Mahila Samatha Society (APMSS) was established as a registered society in the same year to implement the programme.⁷ The journey from *sanghams*⁸ or women's groups to federations started in 1993 when the programme was formally launched. The development of the Mahila Samakhya Programme in Andhra Pradesh will be reported in this chapter.

4.1. Establishment of the Andhra Pradesh Mahila Samatha Society

The state of Andhra Pradesh came into being in 1956 with Telugu its common language. It is located in south India and is a vast and diverse state with the fourth largest area (275 thousand km²) and fifth largest population (75.7 million) (GOI, 2001). The state has great diversity in terms of history, climate, natural resources and socio-economic institutions.

The capital city of Hyderabad has rapidly grown in recent years thanks to the booming IT industry. However, agriculture is the main industry, in which 62% of people are engaged (GOI, 2001). Andhra Pradesh is known as the Rice Bowl of India and also produces wheat, jowar, maize, pulses, tobacco, cotton and sugarcane.

Andhra Pradesh is developing economically, but it lags behind in social development. Its female literacy rate was 51.2% which was the 26th rank in the 35 states and union territories of India, according to the Census 2001 (GOI, 2001). In this large state with a large illiterate population, the APMSS presently operates the Mahila Samakhya Programme in 4,397 villages in fourteen districts with a small number of staff.

The structure of the APMSS is in accordance with the structure shown in Figure 2. At the state level, a total number of 13 staff headed by the State Programme Director work at the head office in Secunderabad, a twin city of Hyderabad. The Samatha Gender Resource Center (SGRC) (see Box 3) is located within the premise of the State Programme Office.

In each operating district, the District Implementation Unit is established and has its own office and staff, and the District Resource Group is created to provide advice to effectively implement the programme. At the village level, *sanghams* are formed with

⁷ In Andhra Pradesh, the name of the programme, Mahila Samakhya, has been renamed as Mahila Samatha, since an organisation whose name included Mahila Samakhya had already existed. However, in order to avoid confusion, this working paper uses the Mahila Samakhya Programme for Andhra Pradesh, instead of the Mahila Samatha Programme.

⁸ Please see footnotes 3 and 4 for the usage of *sangham* and *karyakartha*.

the support of *karyakarthis* or fieldworkers/facilitators. Moreover, the APMSS builds a network with external organisations, such as government agencies, NGOs and international organisations.

Box 3. The Samatha Gender Resource Center

The APMSS has accumulated knowledge and experience in the fields of gender and women's empowerment through interactions with *sangham* women over the years. The APMSS thought it important to share such learning experiences and expertise with people inside and outside the Mahila Samakhya Programme. This led to the establishment of the Samatha Gender Resource Center (SGRC) in 2001 as an institution which is financially independent from the APMSS.

The Centre's objective is to mainstream gender in various projects conducted by many other organisations. One coordinator and a few supporting staff work in the Centre. The SGRC collects documents, such as reports and training modules and materials, newsletters, posters and audio visuals. These are recorded and shelved for reference for the staff and other interested parties.

The SGRC helps the APMSS conduct research, advocacy and capacity building activities. It plays a major role in training people (e.g. the APMSS's staff, *sangham* women, government officials and staff of other NGOs) to become resource persons in gender and women issues. Recently, the SGRC conducts field studies and action research for government offices and NGOs, and tries to build strategic partnerships with public and private organisations. This is beneficial for the APMSS, since it can disseminate the philosophy and principles of the Mahila Samakhya Programme while obtaining information and knowledge from other organisations.

Source: APMSS (2009; 2010a)

Andhra Pradesh is considered to be advanced in the activities of the Mahila Samakhya Programme. One reason is that the state has extensive experience as one of the first target states. Another reason is that Andhra Pradesh is the only programme state that has *sanghams* and federations which have become independent from the programme. The federations have built up their capacity and played important roles in disseminating the philosophy and principles of the Mahila Samakhya Programme.

One contributing factor to this progress is thought to be close relationships among the APMSS's staff at all levels, and between them and *sangham* women. This was observed during the visits to the state and district offices and fields. For example, all the

staff had lunch together at the state office, sharing food that they brought from home. One day, one of the staff's birthday was celebrated after lunch. At the district office, the staff and *sangham* women sang songs and danced together whenever meetings were held. The APMSS even has its own song.

As one of the staff explained: "We are like a family" (personal conversation on January 5, 2011), those who have worked since the establishment of the APMSS have known each other for nearly twenty years. Those who joined the APMSS later are easily able to become new members of the family. The warm atmosphere and the sense of bonding are a strength of the APMSS and the driving force of the successful implementation of the Mahila Samakhya Programme in Andhra Pradesh.



**The APMSS's Head Office
in Secunderabad**



**The District Implementation Unit's
Office in Mahbubnagar**



Staff of the APMSS's Head Office



Celebrating a Birthday

4.2. Capacity building conducted by the APMSS

Capacity building training is part and parcel of the Mahila Samakhya Programme. The APMSS has consistently gathered opinions from *sangham* women, *karyakarthis* and other staff on the types of training that are necessary. At the initial stage of the programme implementation, the APMSS developed training modules on core issues, such as health and gender awareness, and have used them with slight modifications. New training modules have been developed in response to the needs of *sangham* women.

At present, the training modules are categorised into the following four areas (APMSS, 2009; 2010a; 2011).

- (a) Induction training: the philosophy and principles of the Mahila Samakhya Programme
- (b) Skill development training: specific skills, such as repairing of hand-pumps and agricultural technology
- (c) Issue-based training: education, health, natural resources and asset building, governance, and social and gender equity (see Box 4)
- (d) Exposure visits: inside and outside of Andhra Pradesh

Module (a) is conducted for the staff of the APMSS, including those of the state and district offices and *karyakarthis* when they join the APMSS and at quarterly review meetings. Topics include the concepts of the Mahila Samakhya Programme, collective strength, empowerment, decentralisation, decision-making, taking leadership, developing collective strategies, gender perspectives, and communication and facilitation skills.

The other three modules (b), (c) and (d) are conducted for *sangham* women, as well as the APMSS's staff. When organising training workshops, the APMSS appoints resource persons from its staff or outside, as well as from *sangham* women who are trained and recognised as resource persons. Training takes various forms, such as meetings, workshops, brainstorming sessions, discussions and *melas*⁹ in residential or non-residential ways. It is conducted at the village, cluster, mandal, district and state levels.

In particular, an effective means of training is exposure visits, through which direct experience is obtained by seeing the actual situation in the field. Most exposure visits are arranged to go to places where the Mahila Samakhya Programme is conducted and

⁹ *Mela* means a large gathering. In the form of training by the APMSS, it is like a celebration at which *sangham* women gather and express their solidarity for addressing issues, such as education, health, and violence against women. Information is disseminated, using the methods of theatre plays, posters, and group discussions. Government officials and NGOs also attend *melas* and support *sangham* women in their causes.

other NGOs in Andhra Pradesh and other states. *Sangham* women and the APMSS's staff participate in these visits and share what they see and learn with fellow women.

Depending on the topic, some training workshops are conducted for all the *sangham* members and others are conducted for one or two of the representatives of *sanghams*. In the latter case, the representatives are supposed to convey what they have learned to other members. In the beginning of the implementation of the Mahila Samakhya Programme in Andhra Pradesh (1994/95), the APMSS had a strategy to provide training only for some representatives of *sanghams*. These representatives then took on the responsibilities in *sangham* activities. However, other *sangham* women raised their voices in protest that the knowledge and skills that the representatives acquired through the training were not sufficiently shared with them. Then, the APMSS decided to develop the new strategy mentioned earlier (some trainings for all and others for representatives) and produce modules and annual training plans.

The APMSS intends to conduct the various forms of training in a participatory manner, by which *sangham* women are facilitated to think, discuss and speak, rather than only listen to lectures. Emphasis is also placed on enabling them to understand their own situations by linking it with the dynamics of the socio-economic and cultural environment surrounding them. This allows *sangham* women to take ownership of their actions and find solutions to the problems they face.

The training provided by the APMSS is known for its quality, and the *sangham* women and APMSS's staff who undergo this training are highly regarded as well-trained personnel. As a result, they sometimes have an advantage when recruited by external organisations.

Box 4. Training Topics in 2009/10

Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - herbal medicines - nutrition - reproductive health - women's health
Natural resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - women's access to and control over natural resources - organic farming - protection and conservation of resources
Gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - gender discrimination - women's status in society - women's rights

Source: APMSS (2011: 37)



Training Workshops

4.3. Evaluation system of the APMSS

The APMSS has a solid management structure and training system. It also has a well-established monitoring and evaluation system, which is important to improve programme implementation. The review system is set up at each level of the management structure, as follows (APMSS, 2010a).

Mandal review

Mandal review meetings are held at the mandal level once a fortnight. The members are representatives of *sanghams*, *karyakarthis*, the District Implementation Unit and the State Programme Office. They discuss issues to be addressed and decide issues to be prioritised.

District review

District review meetings are held at the district level once a month and are attended by all *karyakarthis* of the district, all staff of the District Implementation Unit, and one representative of the State Programme Office. They share their experiences in the activities being conducted and assess the overall implementation in respective districts.

Core team review

Core team review meetings are held at the State Programme Office bi-monthly, separately for each of the seven operating districts (where the programme started by 2000) and the seven operating districts (where the programme started after 2003). The review team consists of the State Programme Director, State Resource Persons, District Programme Coordinators, District Resource Persons, persons in charge of accounts, and consultants. Quarterly meetings are also organised to review the activities of all fourteen districts with the attendance of the staff at the state and district levels.

The members of the core team review look at all the activities conducted in all operating districts and revise plans at the district and state levels. They also identify topics for capacity building training on the basis of mandal and district review meetings and make plans for future training workshops. The budget and expenditure are reviewed quarterly.

Executive Committee review

The Executive Committee¹⁰ review meetings are held in the State Programme Office quarterly, chaired by the Secretary to the Department of Education, Government of Andhra Pradesh. The progress of the Mahila Samakhya Programme in the state is presented by the APMSS and is reviewed by committee members. The members provide suggestions and recommendations on future directions of the programme and discuss potential collaboration with other organisations in the public and private sectors.

Internal evaluation

In addition to the above four reviews on the Mahila Samakhya Programme, an internal evaluation is also conducted by the staff of the APMSS in the form of self- and peer-evaluations. Each staff member reviews their own performance and that of their colleagues. This provides the staff with good opportunities for finding ways to increase their abilities.

The strength of the APMSS lies here, as well: regular evaluations of the programme implementation are being carried out from the field to the state levels. These review meetings are not merely a performance, and sometimes involve heated discussions. On the basis of the reflections, the APMSS revise plans and strategies and conduct capacity building training workshops.

4.4. Development of the Mahila Samakhya Programme in Andhra Pradesh

The Mahila Samakhya Programme was formally launched in Andhra Pradesh in 1993. At the preparatory stage, the APMSS had extensive consultations with the State Government and NGOs regarding the selection of programme areas. The selection criteria were decided as low levels of female literacy, girls' enrolment and retention, high proportions of scheduled caste and scheduled tribe populations, absence of NGOs and existence of other government schemes.¹¹

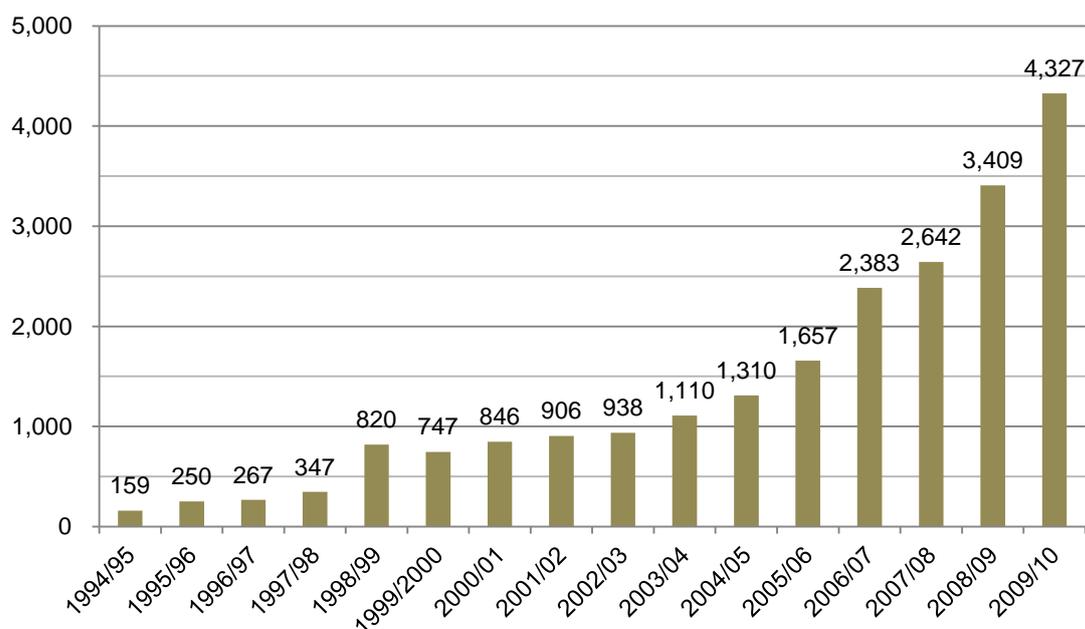
In accordance with these criteria, two districts were selected in 1993 and the number of the programme districts has increased to fourteen in 2010. The number of

¹⁰ See chapter 3.3 for the composition of the Executive Committee.

¹¹ For example, the Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA), the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), and the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP).

sanghams formed increased from 159 to 4,327 (see Figure 3). The eighteen-year history of the programme is divided into four phases in terms of the expansion of the coverage. The developments of each of the phases are summarised below (see Table 2) (APMSS, 2002; 2007b; 2009; 2010a; 2010b; 2010c; 2010d; 2011).

Figure 3. The Number of *Sanghams* Formed by Year (1994/95 to 2009/10)



Source: APMSS (2010d)

4.4.1. First phase (1993 to 1996)

The APMSS started conducting the Mahila Samakhya Programme in six mandals in the two districts of Mahbubnagar and Medak in 1993. These two districts ranked in the lowest three in terms of literacy rates in the state. *Karyakarthis* were trained and started visiting rural villages and motivated women, mainly those of scheduled castes and schedule tribes, to form groups.

At that time, there were not many women's groups in villages. Some were self-help groups formed under the Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas, and others were thrift and credit groups formed by a few NGOs. Mobilisation of women into *sanghams* was the essential activity at the field level. *Karyakarthis* focused on the issues of basic needs and social problems. Through meetings and discussions between women and *karyakarthis*, they gradually showed interests in the programme and were grouped into *sanghams*.

At this nascent stage, the APMSS identified needs for training and education from discussions and interviews with *sangham* women, and started conducting training

workshops for them as well as its own staff. Topics included the importance of education, health, gender awareness, access to government services, political participation, and some skill training.

The APMSS, in consultation with resource persons and *sangham* women, prepared strategies to promote education for women and girls in 1994. In 1995, Adult Learning Centres were opened and Literacy Camps were organised for adult women, and for children, the first Mahila Sikshana Kendram (residential school) was established in Mahbubnagar and Bala Mitra Kendrams (non-formal schools) were initiated in villages.¹² It was here that *sanghams* began to realise the need to educate their children.

During the initial four years, *sanghams* were formed and some took action on such problems as child marriage, domestic violence and low wage rates through collaboration with neighbouring *sanghams*. The activities of *sanghams* brought about some achievements. For example, *sanghams* made their presence known by resolving disputes in families and villages. *Sangham* women were able to gain access to government services, such as ration cards and housing schemes. They ran for elections and became members of *panchayat* (rural self-government) and *sarpanches* (village chiefs).¹³

4.4.2. Second phase (1997 to 1999)

The Mahila Samakhya Programme was expanded to three districts—Karimnagar in 1997 and Adilabad and Nizamabad in 1998, and covered a total of 27 mandals in five districts in 1999. *Sanghams* were growing in number, capacity and area of activities through continuous support from *karyakarthis* and training provided by the APMSS. Demands for training increased and topics diversified. Some *sanghams* became active and strong, and started helping weaker *sanghams*. Some *sangham* women became resource persons and started providing training to other women. Access to government schemes and the level of support from government officials increased.

Sanghams were gathered as clusters and started holding regular cluster meetings. They helped each other in village activities and tackled broad issues together. For example, clusters jointly launched large-scale awareness campaigns against child labour. As *sanghams* developed into clusters, the APMSS took a move to the final stage, i.e. the independence of *sanghams* from the original programme. It held meetings with *sangham* women and discussed the creation of federations of *sanghams* at the mandal

¹² These educational activities will be explained in chapter 5.1.

¹³ *Panchayat* is a self-governance institution in rural areas. It covers areas with populations between 20 and 30 thousands. Each *panchayat* village is divided into wards or colonies, and one representative is elected for each ward. This representative is referred to as a ward member. An election is held every five years to decide ward members and a *sarpanch* (village chief). Of the elected ward members, one *upa sarpanch* (vice village chief) is selected.

level. The issues included the roles, responsibilities and structure of federations, frequency of meetings, and withdrawal of the APMSS. Training workshops were also provided to *sanghams* in the direction towards independence. The process of decentralisation began taking place.

4.4.3. Third phase (2000 to 2003)

The Mahila Samakhya Programme continued expanding its coverage: Nalgonda and Warangal in 2000 and Srikakulam and Vizianagaram in 2003. By that year, the programme reached 1,223 villages in 32 mandals. There emerged a new interest in economic activities among *sangham* women. In response to their request for training, the APMSS organised workshops on vocational training and entrepreneurship.

During this period, a new strategy for forming groups was adopted. Earlier, women's groups were not existent in many villages. *Karyakarthis* approached women and encouraged them to form groups from scratch. Since in general the number of low-caste women in a village who were possible members of a *sangham* is twenty to twenty-five which is a target number of members for one *sangham*, most of earlier *sanghams* consisted of a single caste—scheduled caste or scheduled tribe—with only one *sangham* operating in one village.

In the newly operating districts, there existed women's self-help groups in villages under other projects conducted by state or local governments, as well as NGOs. For example, women's self-help groups were engaged in thrift and credit activities in the Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas, a sub-component of the Integrated Rural Development Programme. These groups were converted into *sanghams* under the Mahila Samakhya Programme and mobilised to work on social agendas in addition to economic activities. Many of these groups were multi-caste groups and more than one group operated in one village.

Progress was made in federating *sanghams*. In 2000, two federations were registered as societies under the Societies Registration Act 1860, followed by four in 2001 and an additional three in 2002. They established Executive Committees and Governing Bodies and started holding meetings on a regular basis. The APMSS held brain-storming sessions and workshops with its staff and *sangham* women to create the vision and missions of the federation.¹⁴ It also provided the federations with training on new topics, such as managerial skills, book keeping and legal literacy. Through meetings and training, the women of the registered federations were able to clarify their roles and responsibilities, and requested more training on capacity building to ensure sustainability of the federations.

¹⁴ These will be shown in Box 10.

The federations started conducting various activities. They organised *melas* to stop child labour and campaigns on children's education and gender awareness; demanded government officials be accountable for delivery of services; and helped the APMSS to expand the programme to new areas. Their activities were recognised by local governments and villagers. As a result, they collaborated with local governments in the implementation of government projects, such as the Mid-day Meal Scheme and the Food for Work Programme, and were asked to provide training on legal literacy and nutrition to self-help groups of the government projects. *Sangham* women who became resource persons provided local governments and NGOs with knowledge and information on gender issues.

4.4.4. Fourth phase (2004 to present)

The coverage of the Mahila Samakhya Programme was widened to Anantapur, Kurnool and Prakasam districts in 2006 and Karimnagar and Visakhapatnam districts in 2009. As of December, 2010, the programme has been implemented in 4,397 villages in 106 mandals in fourteen districts. The APMSS intends to further increase the number of villages covered to more than 250 each in one district, in order to create a critical mass of a pressure group, exert influence on policies and projects for women, and see visible impacts of the programme at the district level. Currently, the number of *sanghams* per mandal ranges from 150 to 394.

During this period, the role of the APMSS has diversified in response to the increasing number of *sanghams* at different levels of progress. New *sanghams* are being formed; more and more clusters and federations are being established; federations are preparing for registration as societies; and registered and independent federations are working on their own. The APMSS organises meetings and training workshops to strengthen the capacities of *sanghams* and federations at different stages in accordance with their needs.

The APMSS's implementation strategies have been revised, too. Firstly, various issues addressed by *sanghams* were categorised into five areas and Issue Committees were established for each area: education, health, natural resources, *Panchayati Raj*,¹⁵ and social issues. Members of a *sangham* are divided into five committees and participate in trainings on topics related to the Issue Committees at the cluster level. They are responsible for informing other members of the contents of the training and taking initiatives in conducting activities on respective issues. This ensures that every woman in a *sangham* learns from training workshops regardless of attendance and has a role to play in *sangham* activities.

¹⁵ See footnote 24.

Secondly, a thematic approach has been adopted in addition to the issue-based approach, by which problems are dealt with in a more integrated manner, since the issues addressed are often related to each other and are cross-cutting. Newly established thematic groups include capacity building, strengthening federations and mandal resource groups, advocacy and lobbying. These groups operate at the village, mandal and district levels.

The federations are growing in their capacity and activity level, with the number of registered federations increasing to twenty-eight in the five older districts—Mahbubnagar, Medak, Adilabad, Karimnagar and Nizamabad. They hold meetings of the Executive Committees and the Governing Bodies regularly, and compile audits, annual reports and project reports. Fifteen federations had their offices built by mobilising resources from elected representatives and local leaders, as well as contribution from *sanghams*. Two federations have taken over the management of Mahila Shikshana Kendram, and one federation started publishing newsletters.

Networks of federations have been established in some districts to tackle broad social issues and help each other. The recognition of the federations' activities has further increased in respective mandals, which has in turn bolstered their collaboration with government officials. More and more federations are now able to enter into contracts with local governments and NGOs to implement their projects.

With these developments, the APMSS organised brainstorming sessions on autonomy and sustainability, support structures, and its role with its staff and the federations. This aimed to further increase the level of independence of the federations and ensure their sustainable growth. In 2007, the APMSS ceased direct implementation of the Mahila Samakhya Programme in five mandals. It has now completely withdrawn from all twenty-eight mandals, while continuing to maintain collaborative relationships with the federations.

The APMSS and federations jointly conduct educational activities, campaigns and trainings for *sangham* women and adolescents, and review their activities at the district level. They also conduct action research with the Samatha Gender Resource Centre. One federation has started the Mahila Samakhya Programme in a new mandal on behalf of the APMSS. The APMSS continues to provide training to federations with a focus on autonomy and sustainability. Subjects include managerial skills, financing, accounting, documentation, proposal writing, institutional building and communication skills.

Through the activities conducted over the years, the APMSS, federations and *sanghams* have increasingly been recognised for their achievements by people in villages, local NGOs and the local and state governments. They have been awarded numerous certificates of appreciation for providing training on legal literacy, cooperating in conducting awareness campaigns on health, and other activities. Yet, the

APMSS are making further efforts to empower marginalised women through education, in order to achieve the long-term objective of enabling them to become pressure groups independent of the Mahila Samakhya Programme. The women of *sanghams* and federations are making steady progress towards their ultimate goals.

Table 2. Status of the Programme for 2009/10

District	MBN	MDK	KNR	ADB	NZB	NLG	WRI	SKL	VZM	ATP	KNL	PKS	KHM	VSP	Total
Starting year	1993	1993	1997	1998	1998	2000	2000	2003	2003	2006	2006	2006	2009	2009	
No of mandals	15 (7)	11 (6)	10 (4)	7 (2)	10 (2)	5 (0)	6 (0)	4 (0)	5 (0)	8 (0)	8 (0)	6 (0)	4 (0)	4 (0)	103 (21)
No of villages	449 (140)	348 (111)	388 (181)	365 (58)	384 (102)	298 (0)	301 (0)	250 (0)	272 (0)	250 (0)	251 (0)	273 (0)	150 (0)	160 (0)	4,139 (592)
No of <i>sanghams</i>	375 (140)	406 (111)	332 (181)	373 (58)	823 (102)	452 (0)	332 (0)	407 (0)	321 (0)	139 (0)	143 (0)	194 (0)	0 (0)	30 (0)	4,327 (592)
No of members	15,029 (5,123)	15,402 (3,010)	13,446 (7,074)	9,426 (1,600)	18,274 (5,923)	22,574 (0)	22,035 (0)	14,144 (0)	12,973 (0)	4,293 (0)	4,770 (0)	4,401 (0)	0 (0)	300 (0)	157,067 (22,730)
No of federations	7	7	7	4	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	28
No of ALCs	58	53	131	55	55	49	81	49	31	22	27	39			650
No of learners	1,906	1,465	3,398	1,295	2,059	1,042	1,699	861	572	543	873	1,066			16,779
No of MSKs	1	2	2	1	2	1	2	1	1	1	1	1			16
No of learners	31	66	69	41	56	38	56	27	29	29	52	38			532
No of <i>bala sanghams</i>	119	83	84	120	90	172	192	122	201	72	95	37			1,387
No of boys	1,282	774	813	930	712	3,508	4,258	1,085	1,793	747	1,578	357			17,837
No of girls	1,695	981	1,418	1,790	963	2,985	5,298	1,526	2,219	1,089	1,497	568			22,029
Total no of children	2,977	1,755	2,231	2,720	1,675	6,493	9,556	2,611	4,012	1,836	3,075	925			39,866

Source: APMSS (2011)

Notes: (1) Districts abbreviated as follows:

MBN – Mahbubnagar, MDK – Medak, ADB – Adilabad, KNR – Karimnagar, NZB – Nizamabad, NLG – Nalgonda, WRI – Warangal,

SKL – Srikakulam, VZM – Vizianagaram, ATP – Anantapur, KNL – Kurnool, PKS – Prakasam, KHM – Khammam, VSP – Visakhapatnam

(2) ALC stands for Adult Learning Centre, and MSK stands for Mahila Sikshana Kendram.

(3) Figures inside the parentheses indicate the numbers for autonomous mandals, villages, *sanghams* and members.

(4) The numbers for Mahbubnagar include Dharur district where the federation implements the Mahila Samakhya Programme.

Table 2. Status of the Programme for 2009/10 (continued)

District	MBN	MDK	KNR	ADB	NZB	NLG	WRI	SKL	VZM	ATP	KNL	PKS	KHM	VSP	Total
No of trained members															
Education	34	25	105		310		113	165							752
Legal literacy	55	30	42	25	71	113	369								705
Health	277	110	45	199	83	948	785	1,496	1,028	678	773	681			7,103
Natural resources	49			62		490	187								788
Economy	0	60	46	32	82		90								310
<i>Panchayati Raj</i>	25	1,200	59		100		129	237	297						2,047
Gender	88	60		91		30	26	406							701
Leadership	29		40	168											237
No of <i>panchayat</i> members	72	70	98	77	55	345	307	354	173						1,551
No of <i>sarpanches</i>	13	4	7	12	0	35	43	46	32						192
No of MPTC	2	2	5	7	2	25	34	32	14						123
No of ZPTC	1	1	0	0	0	2	0	4	0						8
Total no of female representatives	88	77	110	96	57	407	384	436	219						1,874

Source: APMSS (2011)

Note: MPTC stands for Mandal Parishad Territorial Constituency, and ZPTC stands for Zilla Parishad Territorial Constituency.

5. Activities Conducted by the Andhra Pradesh Mahila Samatha Society

In the Mahila Samakhya Programme, the types of activities to be conducted are decided by *sangham* women. They also decide when and how to conduct activities. Over the years, *sangham* women in Andhra Pradesh have tackled various problems with the help of the APMSS, in order to create an environment where women and girls freely enjoy opportunities for education. With the progress of activities, five focus areas have been identified: education, health, natural resources and asset building, governance, and social and gender equity.

This chapter will explain the activities and achievements of the Mahila Samakhya Programme in Andhra Pradesh for each of the five areas.¹⁶ Some of the activities are common for all the programme states, and others are original in Andhra Pradesh.

5.1. Education

Education is, needless to say, the mainstay of the Mahila Samakhya Programme. Through education, the programme aims to improve women's lives by equipping them with confidence to tackle challenges. Efforts are made to remove obstacles to women's and girls' participation in education by conducting awareness-raising campaigns and solving specific problems. The common components for all the programme states are literacy education for *sangham* women and non-formal education for non-school-going children and drop-outs, in particular for girls.

Immediately after the APMSS started the programme in 1993, it collected information on the educational needs of *sangham* women and found many of them were interested in education for themselves and their children. *Sangham* women who started attending literacy classes realised the importance of education and became keen to educate their daughters. Therefore, the APMSS formulated strategies to provide education for women and children, in particular girls in 1994, in consultation with *sangham* women and resource persons on education

The concept paper on the education component of the Mahila Samakhya Programme in Andhra Pradesh was produced in 1997/98 (see Box 5). Education to be provided in the programme is defined as “a process of learning to question, critically analyse issues and problems, and seek solutions” (APMSS, 2002). The contents of education, therefore, include not only literacy and numeracy skills but also a reflection of oneself, analysis of women's situations and sharing experiences.

The APMSS developed a curriculum framework, a core set of teaching and learning materials, and a module for teacher training. It trained master trainers at the

¹⁶ Information in this chapter is obtained from the APMSS (2002; 2007a; 2007b; 2008; 2009; 2010a; 2010b; 2010c; 2010d; 2011), MHRD (2009; 2010a; 2010b), and interviews during the field work.

state level, who in turn taught others to become master trainers at the district level. These master trainers then provided training to *karyakarthis*, local literate women and adolescent girls who were to become teachers at the village level. After these preparations, the following educational projects were launched.¹⁷

Box 5. Concept Paper on Education in Andhra Pradesh

Vision

- (1) Complement and consolidate Mahila Samatha interventions in the state through a holistic education model in the project districts; and
- (2) Strengthen the foundation for a gender sensitive function within the given communities through a meaningful education programme.

Mission

To ensure that women and children in general, and girls working as child labourers in particular, are in a position to access a sustained educational process which, while being need specific, will also enable better and enhanced opportunities in learning as well as self-growth.

Aspects of education

- Developing awareness
- Critical and analytical thinking
- Identifying the problem
- Accessing information
- Finding solutions
- Collective decision making
- Individual and collective action
- Reflection

Source: APMSS (2002)

5.1.1. Education for adults

Adult Learning Centre

In 1993 when the Mahila Samakhya Programme was initiated in Andhra Pradesh, the national programme, the Total Literacy Campaign launched by the Government of India ended. As *sangham* women started group activities, they often needed to contact government officials, for example to obtain access to public services and submit applications. Since most of them were illiterate, they had to depend on educated people in villages. They felt that they should learn literacy skills and conduct activities on their own, and subsequently made a request to the APMSS for literacy education.

Initially *karyakarthis* taught literacy skills at *sangham* meetings, and then encouraged *sangham* women to find an instructor in the village and open a night school

¹⁷ See Table 2 for a summary of achievements in education.

(Adult Learning Centre). The APMSS trained instructors¹⁸ identified by *sanghams* and procured primers and slates from the Department of Adult Education, the state government. Thus, *sangham* women started learning at Adult Learning Centres for one or two hours every night in 1994. *Sangham* huts,¹⁹ public places or private houses were used for the centres.

The instructors were volunteers, but *sangham* women thought that the time invested by the instructors for teaching should be remunerated. They discussed with *karyakarthis* and the APMSS and decided how contributions would be broken down: three rupees paid by a learner, one rupee per learner paid by a *sangham*, and six rupee per learner paid by the APMSS. Since the number of learners was between 15 and 25, an instructor could have 150 to 250 rupees per month. However, some learners had difficulties in contributing three rupees every month, and so the APMSS took over this contribution. It provided 300 rupees per month, and contributions from learners became optional.

The educational level of learners at Adult Learning Centres are assessed and graded: (1) illiterate (unable to read and write); (2) neo-literate (able to recognise alphabets and read simple words, but unable to write); and (3) literate (able to read, write and do simple calculation). When learners join Adult Learning Centres, they take a simple test and are grouped according to the above levels. They are taught literacy and numeracy skills in different groups and take tests during and at the end of the one-year course.

Adult Learning Centres have served as not only as a place for learning but also for accessing information and discussions. Women enjoy attending classes. The centres have also become resource centres. Learning materials are developed at the centres and distributed between the centres. Some *sangham* women who took classes at the centres and excelled in their studies have acquired the capacity to become instructors. In 2009/10, 16,779 women learnt at 650 Adult Learning Centres (see Table 2). It is expected that some of them will teach at the centres in the future, but it is hoped that much more illiterate women will participate in literacy education.

Literacy Camp

The idea of Literacy Camp was created in 1998 as an alternative strategy to promote literacy. Women who were engaged in work inside and outside the home found it difficult to attend literacy classes for a year, and wanted to learn at places which were

¹⁸ After the first training workshop, the instructors attend review meetings every month and refresher courses every two months. They learn, for example, how to develop learning materials, such as flash cards, and how to manage centres.

¹⁹ See section 6.4.1.

away from villages for a short duration so that they could concentrate on their studies. Later on, requests came from *sangham* women for organising Literacy Camps on specific issues, such as legal literacy, with shorter durations.

Currently, there are two types of Literacy Camps. One course is a two-day camp, which is mainly meant for new learners of especially *sanghams* which are newly formed in order to motivate them to learn literacy skills at Adult Learning Centres in villages. The methods used are friendly to learners, including songs, plays, pictures and stories, and topics are close to issues of daily lives. Another course is a five to fifteen-day camp, which targets neo-literates so that they can improve their literacy skills. *Sangham* women can participate in both types of camps more than once. Camps can be conducted in residential or non-residential forms according to requests. Thus, Literacy Camp contributes to increasing women's interest in acquiring, retaining and improving literacy skills.

Short-term Mahila Sikshana Kendram

Short-term Mahila Sikshana Kendram was initiated in 2000 as a result of requests mainly from women of *sanghams* which were progressing towards independence. They wanted to have literacy education on specific topics in the residential form. Through discussions between the women and the APMSS, a Short-term Mahila Sikshana Kendram course of seven to ten days was developed, which combined literacy education with knowledge on specific issues or vocational skills training. With requests for longer courses, another course for fifteen days to one month was also developed in 2005. These courses are organised in two to three phases, since women can practice what they study and then return to learn more, bringing with them feedback from their own experiences.

Participants in the Short-term Mahila Sikshana Kendram are mainly office-bearers of federations, members of Mandal Resource Groups and elected women representatives (see Box 6). The subjects include functional literacy, managerial and institutional skills, topics related to the five Issue Committees, such as health, natural resources and agriculture. Visits to government offices and banks are made to help for participants get accustomed to interacting with officials, for example when they need to obtain information.

Box 6. Short-term Mahila Sikshana Kendram Conducted for Elected Female Representatives

Hearing of the success of the Short-term Mahila Sikshana Kendram approach, the Department of Adult Education, Government of Andhra Pradesh proposed a joint project on literacy education for elected female representatives to the APMSS in 2008. The Department and the APMSS modified the curricula and materials used by the APMSS's Short-term Mahila Sikshana Kendram for *sangham* women elected as representatives, and developed a course and contents for female representatives of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. A workshop was organised for ten days each in three phases in three districts. The contents focused on issues of *Panchayati Raj* as well as literacy skills. The participants were able to increase their knowledge and capacity to effectively work as elected representatives. Furthermore, some participants who had not been members of *sanghams* decided to join *sanghams* after the workshop.

Source: APMSS (2009)

5.1.2. Education for children and adolescents

Bala Mitra Kendram

Bala Mitra Kendram (BMK) started in 1994 out of *sangham* women's concerns for children who did not go to school. BMK provides non-formal education to child labourers as well as miss-outs and drop-outs aged between nine and twelve. BMKs are established within villages where children can have easy access, and the places are usually provided by *Gram Panchayats* (village councils) or villagers. Children attend classes in the evening after work. After attending BMKs for one year, they are expected to be enrolled in classes commensurate with their ages in formal schools. Initially, BMKs were set up for girls only, but they have accepted boys as well.

Teachers are identified within the village and trained by the APMSS. They are required to have completed ten years of education and receive training on non-formal methods of education. The teaching methods at BMKs are participatory and the contents include life skills in addition to studies of the syllabus at formal schools. The salaries of the teachers are paid by the nominal amount of fees charged to children,²⁰ part of the pooled fund of *sanghams* and funding from the APMSS, as is the case for Adult

²⁰ BMKs can be free of charge, but similar to the idea of membership fees for *sanghams*, it is thought that a commitment to schooling on the part of both children and their families can be strengthened by charging school fees.

Learning Centres. In some villages, the same persons teach at BMKs and Adult Learning Centres.

Sangham women monitor BMKs and ensure that children learn well and move into formal schools. BMKs are supposed to shut down a few years after establishment, during which time all children are expected to be enrolled in formal schools. With *sanghams* promoting education for children and people's awareness on the importance of education increasing, the number of BMKs is on the decline. Presently, around 90% of children go to school in the programme areas and only a few BMKs remain in the districts of Kurnool and Anantapur (APMSS, 2011). The next challenge is to keep children in formal schooling and improve their learning achievements.

Mahila Shikshana Kendram

Mahila Shikshana Kendram (MSK) was established in 1995, a year after the first Bala Mitra Kendram was opened. It is a residential school for girls who have never been to school or have dropped out. Many children who study at MSKs have previously worked as child labourers. There are cases in which parents once agreed to withdraw their daughters from the workforce and send them to school, but parents changed their minds and sent their daughters out to work again. Such incidences can be prevented when girls are accommodated in residential schools. Moreover, parents feel that their burden is reduced, since MSKs are free of cost.

Girls at MSKs are expected to be enrolled in classes commensurate with age in schools located in their villages, or to pass the 7th or the 10th grade examinations, after they stay and study in MSKs for about one year. In addition to this prime objective of the MSK, the schooling at MSKs can postpone the age of marriage for girls and equip them with the philosophy of the Mahila Samakhya Programme.

One or two MSKs are established in each of the programme districts, usually at the mandal or district headquarters. At least one residential teacher stays with the girls in MSK, and other teachers commute from home. The qualification of teachers is the same as that for BMK teachers (ten years of education). When necessary, part-time teachers are hired from the Department of Education as instructors of skill training. One administrative staff and one kitchen staff also work in the MSK to care for the girls.

Girls are taught formal subjects at school, such as literacy skills, social studies and science, and other subjects, such as child rights and social and gender equality, and life skills including communication and negotiation skills. They also enjoy extracurricular activities, such as visits to offices and museums, carrying out surveys as small projects during holidays, dancing and yoga.

In 2009/10, 532 girls studied in sixteen MSKs (see Table 2). Of the 62 girls who took the 7th grade examination, 59 passed, and 39 out of 55 who took 10th grade

examinations passed. To date, a total 4,826 girls have studied in MSKs, and 65% of them have been mainstreamed in formal schools or government residential schools for secondary and higher education (APMSS, 2011).

Enrolment drives

Andhra Pradesh records one of the lowest percentages of children who attend school in India. According to the Census 2001 (GOI, 2001), 74.3% of girls and 81.2% of boys aged between six and fourteen are in school. Many of the rest work in fields, factories and restaurants or do domestic work. Poverty is said to be the main reason for non-schooling, but lack of awareness on the importance of education is also a major contributing factor. In order to raise awareness, *sanghams* organise enrolment campaigns in various forms, such as meetings, events and street plays. They also conduct house-to-house surveys to identify children who do not attend school and explain the importance of education to parents and children.

Short-term Motivational Camps

Among the children and parents of low castes, there exist psychological barriers to schooling. Since many of these families have no family members who have schooling experience, they have little idea about schools and express reservations about sending their children to school. There are also cases in which low-caste children face discrimination at school.

Short-term Motivational Camps are organised for seven to thirty days before the school year starts in June, in order to encourage children to join and drop-outs to return to schools. Camps are also organised in agricultural peak seasons and long holidays when children tend to be absent from school.

During the camp, literacy and life skills education is provided and activities which increase children's interest in schooling are conducted. The curriculum also includes health checks, cooking nutritious food, and vocational skills, such as embroidery, book binding, and craft making.

Bala Sangham

Bala Sangham is the children's version of *mahila sangham*. Girls and boys of *sangham* villages form groups, hold meetings and learn about children's rights and life skills with the support of *sangham* women. The Mahila Samakhya Programme considers it important to work with children, since they are the building blocks of the next generation.

Sex-segregated groups, such as youth groups for boys and adolescent girls' groups, are usually present in rural villages, and boys and girls generally do not work together.

Therefore, the existence of Bala Sangham itself is an achievement. As *sangham* women do, children of *bala sanghams* discuss issues that they identify as problems. They are provided gender education and other capacity building training. They act together on such issues as violence against children, child labour and child marriage. In 2009/10, 1,387 *bala sanghams* were in operation in Andhra Pradesh, in which 17,837 boys and 22,029 girls have participated (see Table 2).

National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level

The National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL) is a part of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan.²¹ The NPEGEL focuses on girls who are the hardest to reach. In this programme, one model school is created in every cluster of about ten villages, and these schools conduct intensive community mobilisation to increase girls' enrolment and rigorously monitor their school attendance. Other activities include teacher training on gender awareness, development of gender-sensitive learning materials, and provision of incentives for girls, such as stationery and uniforms.

The APMSS cooperates with the state government to implement the NPEGEL in operating 96 clusters in seven districts. A Cluster Committee is established in each cluster, consisting of a school headmaster, a *sarpanch*, and representatives from parents, *sanghams* and *bala sanghams*. These committee members hold meetings and decide how to increase girls' enrolment and to improve the quality of education.

5.2. Health

Health is also an important area as a basic need. Andhra Pradesh is not the lowest-ranking state in terms of health indicators, such as Body Mass Index and Infant Mortality Rate (GOAP, 2008). Availability of Primary Health Centres is higher than the national average. However, there are rural villages which have no hospitals or medical practitioners. Even if health facilities do exist, they may not function as expected due to a lack of equipment and medicine, or staff absenteeism.

People's awareness on health and sanitation used to be low, which in turn ended up as the cause of various diseases. Health was raised as an important issue to be addressed especially in the beginning of the Mahila Samakhya Programme in Andhra Pradesh. A variety of activities, mainly awareness-raising campaigns and dissemination of information and knowledge, have been conducted on hygiene, nutrition, polio, reproductive health, HIV/AIDS and traditional health practices. Training on the use of herbal medicines is also provided. A few cases of these activities are reported below.

²¹ See footnote 6.

HIV/AIDS campaign

In India, the number of women who are at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS is on the rise, and Andhra Pradesh records the highest proportion of HIV-positive people (GOAP, 2008: 82). One reason for this phenomenon is pointed out. Andhra Pradesh has a vast network of highways and other roads, and many brothels have been established alongside these roads in recent years. The number of female sex workers is rising, many of who are victims of human trafficking. In brothels, condoms are not commonly used, which increases the risk of sex workers contracting with HIV/AIDS, and results in the spread of the disease through customers of brothels, such as lorry drivers and migrants.

The stigma attached to HIV/AIDS patients and related violence are the main issues which *sangham* women have decided to address. The APMSS provides training on HIV/AIDS, preventive measures, access to health services, and care of the infected. Campaigns are organised with a duration of one week to one month through videos and pamphlets, and education on HIV/AIDS is carried out at schools. Tests for HIV/AIDS infection is conducted with the support of private and public health institutions.

Filarial camp

Many people are affected by filariasis in some districts, such as Karimnagar and Nizamabad, of Andhra Pradesh and there are signs that the disease will spread to other districts. It is considered important to educate village people on filariasis. One-day training workshops are organised in villages to provide information on causes and symptoms of the disease, preventive measures and treatment, and to encourage the use of mosquito nets. One-day camps are followed to diagnose the disease and start treatment.

Grama Sambaralu

Grama Sambaralu means village tour. *Sangham* women mobilise villagers to participate in this village tour, by which they find problems related to health and plan actions to be taken. Additional activities are conducted depending on the village. For example, they include cleaning streets and drains, creating maps which show where resources or literates are, and film shows.

5.3. Natural resource and asset building

Many *sangham* women work in the primary industry, but they are mostly marginal and unskilled workers with little access to productive assets. *Sangham* women think that it is important to acquire a means for their own livelihood, while also protecting natural resources. To achieve this, strategic and collective actions are necessary. The scope of activities is broad: access to and control over natural resources, food security, organic

farming, kitchen gardens, deforestation, wages from agriculture labour, access to credit, and campaigns against the use of plastic covers.

Samatha Dharani Project

The Samatha Dharani Project (collective farming) was proposed by *sangham* women, approved by the Department of Agriculture, Government of Andhra Pradesh, and supported by the UNDP. The objective was to achieve food security while conserving natural resources. The programme also aimed to recognise women's contributions to agricultural activities. From 2000 to 2005, 13,745 *sangham* women in 500 villages in 27 mandals participated in this programme (APMSS, 2008).

Sanghams were provided with agricultural equipment and skill training to improve agricultural technology and production. They were also provided 30 to 75 thousand rupees as Micro Capital Assistance to start collective farming. With this seed money, some *sanghams* rented land and others regenerated fallow and degraded land assigned by the government. They produced food crops by using bio-pesticides and organic manure, and built storage huts for grains. Thus, *sangham* women have become able to earn income and increase food security. Though the support from the UNDP has ended, around 90% of the *sanghams* continue collective farming (interviewed, January 10, 2011).

5.4. Governance

Women's political participation is essential in bringing about changes in society. Opportunities were made available by the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India in 1994:

“Not less than one-third of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every *panchayat* shall be reserved for women”

The timing was perfect. Governance was an area to which the Mahila Samakhya Programme attached importance in order to achieve political empowerment of women.

The APMSS intended to involve *sangham* women in local governance from the beginning. It encourages them to vote, run for elections, support fellow members as candidates, and equip candidates with necessary knowledge and skills by providing training on elections, the *Panchayati Raj* institution, and the quota system for women.

Before elections, the APMSS sets up nomination desks which provide information on the procedure of applying for candidacy. *Sangham* women carry out pre-election voter awareness campaigns and election campaigns together with their candidates. They encourage village women to go out and vote.²² *Sangham* women who become elected

²² *Sangham* women also support male candidates who can address women's issues and concerns.

representatives are provided training by the APMSS, by which they actively engage in putting forward women-friendly policies and projects.

In 1995, only two years after the programme started in Andhra Pradesh, 63 women were elected as members of *panchayats*, and the number increased to 585 in 2001 (APMSS, 2007a; 2010a). In 2007, 4,278 women ran for *panchayat* elections and 1,874 won, out of which 148 women ran for general seats (not the seats reserved for women). There were two *panchayats* whose members were all women.²³

In 2009/10, there were 1,551 *panchayat* members, and 192 *sarpanches* out of *sangham* women (see Table 2). Moreover, they challenged higher levels of political representation. 123 were elected as members of Mandal Parishad Territorial Constituency and eight as members of Zilla Parishad Territorial Constituency.²⁴

Sangham women that become elected representatives are also appointed as the members of the Committee of the Panchayat Mahila Evam Yuva Shakti Abhiyan (PMEYSA). This is a forum of all elected representatives of *panchayats* in the state under the initiative of the Ministry of *Panchayati Raj*, Government of India. The Committee consists of twelve members from elected representatives, NGOs and the state government.

5.5. Social and gender equity

Achieving social and gender equity is an overall goal of the Mahila Samakhya Programme. The oppressive social environment and unjust social practices are issues that continue to be raised by *sangham* women at meetings, since the majority of them belong to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. They are doubly disadvantaged as those at the bottom of the social strata and as women in patriarchal society. Discriminatory customs and practices against women are issues that are expressed often.

For example, lower caste people are not allowed to approach or even speak to upper caste people. Women have to cover their heads with veils, and take off and carry their sandals when they meet upper caste men on streets. They are not expected to dress well or even comb their hair (Purushothaman, 2010: 25). At school, upper caste children sit at desks, while lower caste children have no desks.

Such situations need be changed in order for women to be empowered, and women need to be empowered in order to achieve social and gender equality. However, it takes a long time to change people's minds and attitudes and then change society. There are

²³ For information, in Andhra Pradesh women now account for 33% of *panchayat* members as a result of the election in 2005. In 2009, the state government decided to increase the quota for women to 50%.

²⁴ In Andhra Pradesh, *Panchayati Raj* consists of four tiers. *Gram Panchayat* is the lowest tier and the next tier is Mandal Parishad, which covers a population of 35 to 50 thousands. The third tier is Zilla Parishad at the district level. The highest tier is the Zilla Abhivrudhi Sameeksha Mandal which is headed by a cabinet minister.

many obstacles to overcome. It is almost impossible for individual women to fight against the barriers based on the caste system and fixed ideas of gender, but it is possible for women to unite as *sanghams* and collectively work to break down these barriers.

The APMSS first offers *sangham* women opportunities to understand and become aware of the inequalities they face. It provides information and knowledge on laws, such as Domestic Violence Act and laws related to marriageable ages, and training on gender and legal literacy. A number of awareness raising campaigns are also conducted and special days, such as International Women's Day, are observed.

Mahila Court

The idea of establishing a Legal Aid Centre emerged from federations' experiences and it was named as the Mahila Court. This court is an informal mechanism to resolve disputes within families, communities and villages through negotiations and from gender perspectives. The first three Mahila Courts were established in Mahbubnagar and Medak districts in 2003.

A few members of the Social Issue Committee in each *sangham* receive three-day training on legal rights, legal services, counselling and negotiation skills. Of these women, two to three become members of the Social Issue Committee at the cluster level. Of the members of the cluster committees, fifteen become members of the Mahila Court Committee. They receive further training specialised in legal literacy, legal services, counselling, negotiation and arbitration skills, and utilising available legal services. *Sanghams* and the APMSS forge linkages with governments, police and judiciaries at the mandal level.

The Mahila Court is convened every fifteen days and the members discuss how to settle cases brought to the Court. When cases are too complicated for the Court to deal with, they are referred to police or the judiciary system. There have also been cases which are passed from the police to the Mahila Court. Since the first three Mahila Courts were established, they have dealt with cases of rape, child marriage, dowry and property disputes. In 2009/10 alone, 211 cases were settled by the Mahila Courts in the state (APMSS, 2011: 40).

Box 7. Power of Collectiveness

A young man from a poor family wanted to get water from the common pipe when he was building his house. But, he could not get water, because the *sarpanch* of the village used the pipe for a long time. Hearing this, the man's sister asked the *sarpanch* why her brother was not allowed to take water from the common pipe. The *sarpanch* shouted at her, uttering discriminatory words against low castes and women. The young woman was shocked at his reaction and ended up committing suicide.

Her family informed the *sangham* of this incidence. *Sangham* women brought the young woman's body in front of the *sarpanch's* house and demanded justice. Around 200 police came to his house to protect him. Then, *sangham* women mobilised nearly 800 women in a demonstration. The police used water cannons on the women and removed the young woman's body from the *sarpanch's* house. By that time, more *sangham* women arrived from other mandals. Faced with this growing force, leaders in the village who supported the *sarpanch* ran away. Later on, with the request from the family of the young woman, *sangham* women filed a suit against the *sarpanch*. He was arrested on charges of abetting the girl's suicide.

Source: Purushothaman (2010: 21)

Box 8. Fighting against Corruption

A girl could not go to college on the day of admission, because one of her relatives passed away. When she went to the college the following day, she was told by the administration officer that she had to pay a Rs 5,000 bribe to be admitted. *Sangham* women heard of this and went to see the *sarpanch*. His advice was to pay the admission charge to the college.

The *sangham* women went to the college to lodge a complaint. Unable to locate the officer, they went to see one of the members of the Legislative Assembly and explained the situation. The assembly member immediately spoke to the officer and the girl was admitted to the college without having to pay any money. The officer was reported to have said that he did not think that the *sangham* women would bring their appeal to that high level.

Source: Purushothaman (2010: 31-32)

Box 9. List of Activities Conducted under the Mahila Samakhya Programme in Andhra Pradesh

1. Education

(1) For adults

- Adult Learning Centre
- Literacy Camp
- Short-term Mahila Sikshana Kendram (MSK)
- Focused Literacy Camp and Short-term MSK for members of Federation Executive Committees, Resource Groups, and elected female representatives
- Literacy sessions at *sangham* meetings and trainings
- Collaborative activities with Department of Adult Education and Directorate of Andhra Pradesh Open School Society, Government of Andhra Pradesh

(2) For children and adolescents

- Bala Mitra Kendram
- Mahila Shikshana Kendram
- Enrolment drives
- Short-term Motivational Camps
- Bala Sangham
- National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level
- Career Guidance Forum

2. Health

- HIV/AIDS campaign
- Filarial camp
- *Grama Sambaralu*
- Health camp
- Sanitation and access to safe drinking water
- Nutrition
- Reproductive health in a life-cycle approach
- Immunisation and child care
- Reviving traditional health systems (e.g. herbal medicine)
- Training to health workers and health educators

3. Natural Resources and Asset Building

- Samatha Dharani Project
- Awareness campaign on environmental protection and conservation
- Vocational skills training
- Backyard vegetable gardens
- Micro enterprise
- Vermicompost
- Traditional food crops and organic farming
- Participation in government programmes (e.g. National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, Social Forestry, Joint Forest Management, and Wasteland Development)

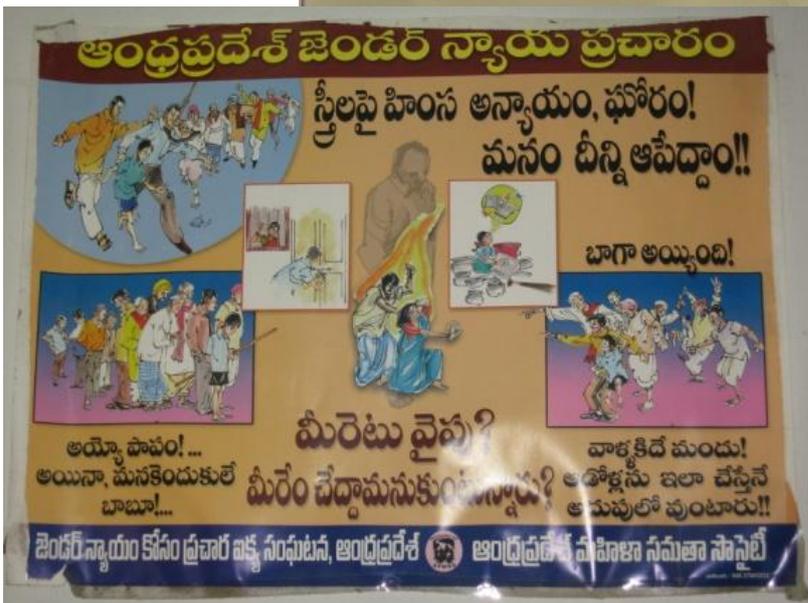
4. Governance

- Awareness of political participation
- Pre-election voter awareness campaign
- Nomination desk
- Capacity building to members of *panchayat* and *Gram Panchayat*
- Creating a network of all elected female representatives at the mandal and district levels
- Advocacy
- Model *panchayat*

5. Social and Gender Equity

- Mahila Court
- Campaign against sale of *arrack* (alcoholic drink)
- Awareness raising on gender, oppressive social customs, and legal issues
- Training on legal literacy
- Prevention and elimination of domestic violence, rape and murder of women
- Elimination of child marriage, the *jogini* system and child labour

Source: Fieldwork (2011)



Posters Created by the APMSS:
Campaigns against Violence (top), Dowries (middle) and Social Discriminations (bottom)

6. The Case of Makthal Federation in Mahbubnagar District

The Mahila Samakhya Programme envisions its exit when *sanghams* become strong enough to work on their own. All programme activities and processes are geared towards this. As with other states participating in the programme, *sanghams* in Andhra Pradesh are united as clusters and then federated at the mandal level. These federations then build networks at the district level. The federation in Makthal mandal in Mahbubnagar district, as one of the first two federations established in Andhra Pradesh, is making impressive progress.

Taking this federation as a case study, this chapter will examine the process of empowerment from individual *sanghams* to federations on the basis of the fieldwork. For the purpose, five group discussions were conducted during the fieldwork with: (a) the staff of the District Implementation Unit of Mahbubnagar and the *karyakarthis* in Makthal mandal; (b) the members of the *sangham* in Dandu village; (c) the members of the Karni cluster; (d) the Executive Committee members of Makthal federation; and (e) the girls studying at Mahila Shikshana Kendram in Mahbubnagar.

6.1. Federations established in Andhra Pradesh

There are 163 federations established in the Mahila Samakhya Programme. Andhra Pradesh has the second highest number of 28 federations after Karnataka state which started the programme earlier than Andhra Pradesh (see Table 1). As one of the front runners in federations' activities, this section will present the situation of the federations in the state.

6.1.1. The vision and missions of the federations

In Andhra Pradesh, the idea of creating mandal-level federations emerged from *sangham* women during facilitation and training by the APMSS. *Sangham* women and the APMSS together had intensive and extensive discussions on this issue and explored ways in which federations could effectively function.

A federation is defined as “a confederation of all village level *sanghams* at the mandal level” (Purushothaman, 2010: 10). It is a forum where poor and marginalised women gather and organise themselves to transform disadvantageous socio-cultural and economic conditions. Federations also play an intermediary role between *sangham* women and external bodies, such as state and local governments and NGOs.

The vision and missions (see Box 10), which were formulated by *sangham* women together with the APMSS, reflect the objectives of the Mahila Samakhya Programme. Involving all women in the villages, federations work as pressure groups to facilitate positive changes in society, and their strategies focus on education, political

participation and networking. By being federated, *sangham* women can enhance their power to tackle problems and challenge deep-rooted gender biases.

Box 10. Vision and Missions of the Federations in Andhra Pradesh

Vision

A Society, where women have value, recognition and dignity together with social, economical and political equality.

Missions

- Reaching out to all women in the village
- Responding to issues of women's concern
- Pressure group to influence desirable social changes
- Reducing social inequalities and gender discrimination both within the family and in the larger society
- Focused campaign and action on improving women's literacy and girl's education
- Transferring knowledge and information to empower the second generation (children of *bala sanghams* and daughters-in-law)
- To converge and network with governments and NGOs
- Increased participation in local governance
- Supporting elected women representatives for influencing micro level planning
- To demand for women friendly policies and planning

Source: APMSS (2010b)

6.1.2. Autonomous federations as a goal

Autonomy is the final stage for federations in the Mahila Samakhya Programme. After *sanghams* are federated at the mandal level, federations are expected to work towards autonomy. On the management side, they are required to establish offices, be capable in documentation and auditing, which are necessary requirements for registered societies, and raise funds for activities. In terms of human resources, they are required to have their own resource persons.

Autonomy is also defined both in relationships within the federation and with others. Federations need to be self-sufficient and independent of external bodies and the APMSS; likewise, each *sangham* needs to be so from the federation. Following the philosophy and principles of the Mahila Samakhya Programme, federations take the initiative in solving problems and changing society by overseeing and helping clusters and *sanghams* in the mandals where they operate, as does the APMSS. They develop linkages with various stakeholders and work as pressure groups to assert women's rights. Thus, federations are making efforts to realise gender-equal society.

When 80% of *sanghams* which belongs to a federation is active and strong enough

to work independently and the federation builds capacity as an autonomous body,²⁵ the APMSS withdraw itself from the operating mandal. However, the relationship between the two parties remains close. Federations attend district review meetings and help with planning and implementation of the Mahila Samakhya Programme, while the APMSS continues providing capacity building training (see Box 11).

Ultimately, autonomous federations aim to make following achievements (APMSS, 2010b).

- To facilitate the next generation to succeed their activities in order to create a society without social and gender discrimination
- To form into a Gender Resource Group
- To act as a pressure group to realise women's rights
- To be recognised as an institution working on women's and girls' concerns
- To be part of the mandal and district level planning committees

Box 11. Capacity Building of Federations

Institutional process

- Concept of decentralisation
- Structure of federation
- Roles and responsibilities of federation office bearers
- Leadership quality

Managerial skills

- Accounts and book keeping
- Publishing annual reports
- Project proposal writing
- Documentation
- Annual auditing of accounts
- Networking and advocacy

Issue-based skills

- Literacy skills
- Issue-based resource group training
- Training of trainers programme
- Legal literacy
- Counselling
- Functioning Legal Aid Centre
- Catering committee training
- Vocational and livelihood skills training

Source: APMSS (2010b)

²⁵ The APMSS uses the terms, "independent" and "autonomous" almost interexchangeably. But, precisely speaking, it considers "independence" as a situation where *sanghams* or federations operate on their own with the low level of support from the APMSS and "autonomy" as a situation where the APMSS completely withdraw from the programme areas where *sanghams* or federations are established.

6.1.3. Status of federations in Andhra Pradesh

The first two federations—one in Mahbubnagar and one in Medak—were created and registered as societies under the Societies Registration Act 1860 in 2000. It was seven years after the Mahila Samakhya Programme first started in these two districts of Andhra Pradesh. Since then, the number of federations has increased steadily and out of 106 programme mandals all the *sanghams* have been federated in twenty-eight mandals as of 2010 (see Tables 3 and 4). The federations count a total number of 41,455 women as members, and approximately 8,000 women have been trained and acknowledged as resource persons for each of the five issues.²⁶

The federations in Andhra Pradesh had been making progresses towards autonomy. Twenty-four federations became autonomous by December 2010, and the rest of four followed suit. In March, 2011, the APMSS withdrew from all the twenty-eight mandals where the federation were established. It is expected that more federations will be created and operate autonomously.

Table 3. Present Status of the Federations in Andhra Pradesh (as of December, 2010)

No of federations	28
No of autonomous federations	24
No of Federations with own offices	15
No of villages covered	1,103
No of participating <i>sangham</i> women	41,455
Issue Committees (no of members and no of resource persons in brackets)	
Education	7,640 (498)
Health	7,812 (667)
Natural Resources	7,646 (603)
<i>Panchayati Raj</i>	7,532 (561)
Social issues	7,489 (678)

Source: APMSS (2010b)

²⁶ All the *sangham* women do not belong to the Issue Committees and one woman belong to more than one Issue Committee.

Table 4. Details of the Federations in Andhra Pradesh for 2009/10

District (started year)	Mandal	Name of federation	Registered year
Mahbubnagar (1993)	Makthal	Swatantra Bharata Mahila Sangham*	2000
	Maganur	Arunodaya Mahila Sangham*	2001
	Narva	Kartavya Mahila Sangham*	2001
	Utkoor	Swechha Mahila Sangham*	2001
	Devarakadra	Chaitanya Mahila Federation*	2006
	Hanwada	Samatha Mahila Federation*	2006
	Koilkonda	Jhansi Mahila Federation*	2006
Medak (1993)	Pulkal	Swatantra Chitanya Mahila Sangham*	2000
	Andole	Swashakti Mahila Sangham*	2001
	Alladurg	Nava Chaitanya Mahila Sangham*	2002
	Regode	Vijayapatha Mahila Sangham*	2002
	Tekmal	Pragathi Mahila Sangham*	2002
	Shankarampet	Samaana Mahila Sangham*	2004
	Papannapet	Rakshana Mahila Sangham*	2006
Adilabad (1997)	Sipur	Jangubai Mahila Federation*	2004
	Kerameri	Navajyothi Mahila Federation	2006
	Asifabad	Saraswathi Mahila Federation	2007
	Jainur	Parvathi Mahila Federation*	2008
Karimnagar (1997)	Bejjanki	Sri Margadarsi Mahila Sangham*	2004
	Husnabad	Mundadugu Adarsha Mahila Sangham*	2005
	Ellanthakunta	Abhivruddhi Chaitanya Mahila Federation *	2006
	Gangadhara	Shanthi Samatha Mahila Federation*	2006
	Chigurumamidi	Jhansi Mahila Federation	2008
	Koheda	Sri Chitanya Federation*	2008
	Saidapur	Vennela Mahila Federation	2008
Nizamabad (1997)	Yellareddy	Samaikyatha Mahila Federation*	2005
	Gandhari	Ikyatha Mahila Federation*	2005
	Nagireddypet	Samanthara Mahila Federation*	2005

Source: APMSS (2010b)

Note: * indicates an autonomous federation.

6.2. The context of Makthal mandal, Mahbubnagar district

Andhra Pradesh consists of twenty-three districts which are divided into three regions, namely Coastal Andhra, Rayalaseema and Telangana. This geographical division roughly corresponds with agro-climatic and socio-economic conditions. Coastal Andhra benefits from fertile soil and a well-developed irrigation system, and produces rice and commercial crops. Rayalaseema and Telangana are semi-dry or semi-arid and depend on rainfed agriculture. They grow mainly millet, groundnut, cotton and chillies. According to the socio-economic indicators, Coastal Andhra is the most advanced of the three regions, followed by Rayalaseema and then Telangana.

Mahbubnagar is located in the Telangana region and is one of the least developed districts in Andhra Pradesh. 89.4% of its population lives in rural areas, which is the highest of all districts in Andhra Pradesh (GOI, 2001). As shown by various indicators in Table 5, Mahbubnagar lags behind other districts economically and socially. The per capita gross district domestic product is in one of the lowest (Rs 8,996), and the adult literacy rates are the lowest for both men and women (56.6% and 31.9%, respectively).

Women in Mahbubnagar appear to be more disadvantaged than those in other districts. The sex ratio is highly skewed toward males (972), which suggests a strong preference for sons. The total fertility rate is the highest (3.1) and the infant mortality is the second highest (58 per thousand) in the state. The high percentage of people who married below the legal minimum age (42.6%) implies continuation of child marriage. The highest percentage of women who participate in economic activities (47.2%) means that women have to find a balance between outside work and domestic work.

Table 6 also shows the overall level of development for Mahbubnagar in the state. It is at the lowest level in terms of economy, education and health. From these statistics, it is very clear why Mahbubnagar was selected as one of the first target districts of the Mahila Samakhya Programme. When the APMSS mobilised women to form groups, literacy education was used as a main objective and was the issue most raised by women.

Makthal mandal is one of 64 mandals in Mahbubnagar district. It is located in the centre of the west end of the state which borders Karnataka state. It is about 65 km away (about one hour by car) from the district headquarters, Mahbubnagar. Makthal has a population of 62,205 (31,134 men and 31,071 women) in an area of 352.7 km². It is predominantly rural, but there is a busy market with many shops in the centre of Makthal mandal.

The majority of people engage in agricultural activities under harsh climatic conditions, suffering from frequent droughts and natural calamities. They produce dry crops, such as castor, groundnut, maize, pulse and sunflower, due to the dry weather and the lack of irrigation facilities. Rice is grown only in places where water is available.

Cotton had been a major crop, but the size of the area for producing cotton and cotton seeds is on the decline.

Table 5. Socio-economic Situation of Mahbubnagar District

Indicator	Value	Ranking in the state
Area	18,400 km ²	2
Population	3,513,934	10
% of urban population	10.6%	23
Per capita gross district domestic product	Rs 8,996	21
Adult (15+) literacy rate	44.4% (total)	23
	56.6% (male)	23
	31.9% (female)	23
	22.7% (SC female)	16
	50.1% (ST female)	8
% of school-going children (5-14 age group)	59.9%	23
Sex ratio	972	18
Total fertility rate	3.1	1
Infant mortality rate (per thousand)	58	2
% of people married below the legal minimum age	42.6%	8
Female work participation rate	47.2%	1

Sources: Government of Andhra Pradesh (2008) and computed from the Census 2001 (GOI)

Table 6. Level of Development for Mahbubnagar District

Dimension Indices	Value	Ranking in the state	Average value of Andhra Pradesh
Income (2003/04)	0.276	21	0.371
Education (2001)	0.449	23	0.607
Educational Attainment Index (2001)	46.02	23	n/a
Health (2001)	0.467	22	0.633
Disparity Index in wage rate for agriculture field labour (2004/05)	0.671	15	0.725

Source: Government of Andhra Pradesh (2008)

Note: As for Disparity Index in wage rate for agriculture field labour, disparity is lower, as the value of is close to 1.

In October, 2009 after little rainfall during the monsoon season, Andhra Pradesh was hit by torrential rain—the first time in decades—and was inundated by a large-scale flood. Mahbubnagar was one of the most affected areas. Many people lost their houses, crops and livestock, which made their already difficult lives more complicated.

Migration, therefore, is a means of making a living. Many people go to work in cities, such as Hyderabad, Mumbai, Pune and Raichur. When only men migrate and women are left with their children in villages, women are burdened with both earning a living and managing the household. When the whole family migrates, children's education is often disrupted. These are the situations that the women in Makthal live with every day.



Mandal Headquarters' Office



Market in Mandal

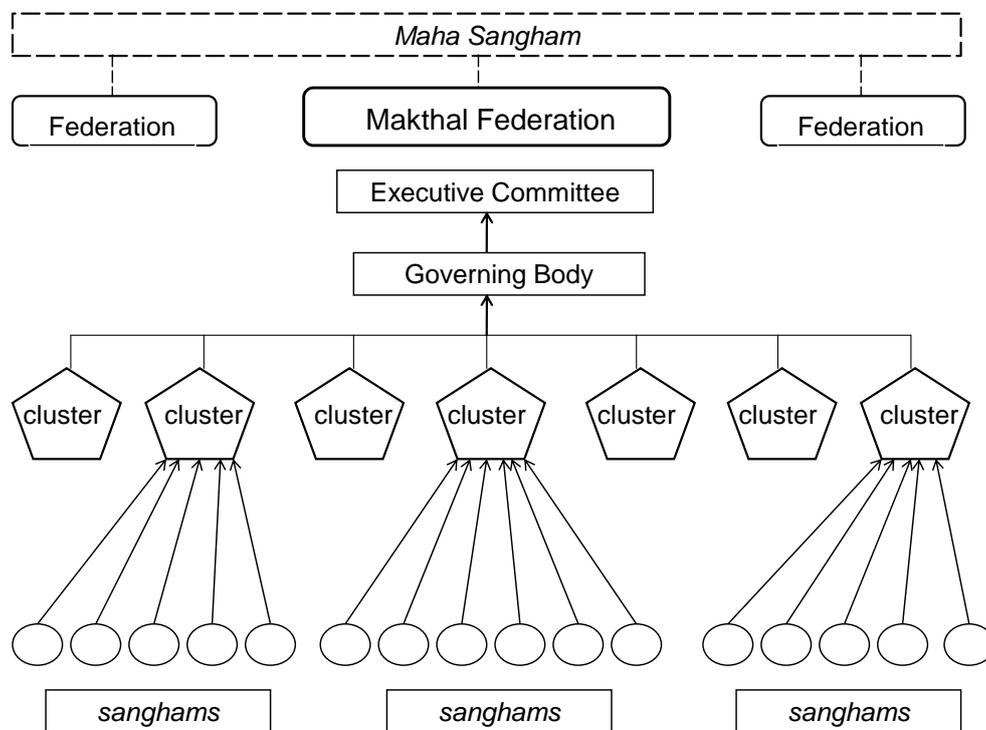
6.3. Organisational structure of Makthal federation

Makthal mandal was selected as one of the six mandals for participation in the Mahila Samakhya Programme when the APMSS initiated interventions in 1993. The reason was clear. As the previous section showed, Makthal was a less-developed area and women appeared to face various and serious problems. It perfectly met the selection criteria of the programme: the female literacy rate was low and the proportion of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes population was high. Under this circumstance, *sanghams* in Makthal have made progresses over the years and have united as a federation.

One of the characteristics of the Mahila Samakhya Programme is a participatory and bottom-up approach with decentralised decision-making. Decisions are made on the basis of consensus among *sangham* women, since the APMSS believes that in order for women's groups to be sustainable, it is important for member women to have a sense of ownership. This is especially essential for federations which are supposed to operate as statutory and coordinating bodies of *sanghams* after the APMSS's withdrawal.

There were a number of discussions on the structure of federations between the APMSS and *sangham* women after the idea of creating federations surfaced. The structure had to correspond to the concept of the programme and ensure its effectiveness. Initially, different structures were adopted for the federations in Andhra Pradesh. Through trial and error, the Makthal model of organisational structure (see Figure 4) was developed, which is the current model used by all federations in the state. The details of this structure will be explained in the following section, taking Makthal federation as an example, along with the process in which women in Makthal have been united as *sanghams* and then a federation.

Figure 4. Structure of Makthal Federation



Source: Created by the author from APMSS (2010b).

6.4. Journey from *sanghams* to a *Maha Sangham*: the case of Makthal federation

Individual *sanghams* formed in villages have developed into groups of clusters, and federations in Andhra Pradesh since 1993. The *sanghams* in Makthal mandal have spearheaded this process before and after the federation was established in 2000. The journey of Makthal federation will be detailed in this section.

6.4.1. Formation of *sanghams*

The process of women forming into a *sangham* is divided into four stages, namely (1) rapport building, (2) group formation, (3) group activities, and (4) independence. In order to assess the development of *sanghams*, the APMSS has a set of descriptive indicators for each stage (see Box 14). In reference to these indicators, the formation process of *sanghams* in Makthal will be reported below.

Stage I: Rapport building between karyakarthis and village women

Karyakarthis, who underwent training by the APMSS, played an important role in the initial stages of the programme. Their first task was to build rapport with women in villages. *Karyakarthis* started visiting several villages in Makthal in 1993 and approached women of low socio-economic status, as well as other villagers. They explained about the philosophy and principles of the programme and listened to their ideas and concerns. This was the first step to motivate women to form groups to deal with the problems that they were facing.

Since the Mahila Samakhya Programme does not offer direct services, such as provision of food and health services, it sometimes takes time for women to understand what the programme is about and decide to join. In general, it takes two to four months with five to eight visits or sometimes more than a year, before the *karyakarthis* are accepted by the women in villages and for the women to start thinking of organising themselves (interviewed, January 5, 2011).



Group Discussion (a) with the Staff of the District Implementation Unit of Mahbubnagar and the *Karyakarthis* in Makthal Mandal

Stage II: Women forming into sanghams

Karyakarthas continued visiting villages on a regular basis and helped women recognise their disadvantaged positions within the family, community and village. Discussions were held between *karyakarthas* and women. *Karyakarthas* helped women articulate the problems that they were facing and kept encouraging them to form groups. Gradually, more and more women in small groups joined the meetings with *karyakarthas*.

Stage III: Conducting group activities

With the encouragement of the *karyakarthas*, from 1994 fifteen to forty women in one village started gathering together to hold meetings at their homes, community halls or government buildings once or twice a month. *Sanghams* were created one after another, to which the APMSS provided mats for sitting, books, and other materials. *Sanghams* which wanted to have their own meeting venues and keep these items tried to obtain land from *panchayats* free of cost. When successful, they could request the APMSS for funding to construct a *sangham* hut (Rs 30,000), contributing their own labour to construct the building.

In one *sangham*, one **governing body member** was selected and the other members were divided into one or more of the five Issue Committees (education, health, natural resources, *Panchayati Raj* and social issues). They were responsible for conducting activities in each area.

Sangham women discussed various issues and problems in their daily lives with *karyakarthas* as facilitators, supporters and guides. This was an important process which allowed women to reflect, ask questions, speak freely, analyse problems, articulate their needs, and finally seek solutions. *Sangham* women realised the need for information, knowledge and skills to solve their problems, and made requests to the APMSS for training. In response, the State Programme Office and the District Implementation Units organised various training workshops, seminars and field visits at the district, mandal, cluster and village levels throughout the year. Members started contributing two rupees per month as a membership fee, and the pooled membership fees were used for travel to attend training workshops.

The State Programme Office develops certain training modules on such topics as nutrition, hygiene, literacy, gender, candle



Sangham Hut in Karni Village

making, agricultural skills, and use of herbal medicine. It also develops training modules on new topics upon requests from *sanghams*.

While *sangham* women gained information, knowledge and skills and developed their capacities through training, they could analyse the causes of the problems, such as child labour, dowries and violence against women, and consider actions to be taken together with *karyakarthis*. One important activity was to obtain access to government schemes and proper public services. *Sanghams* applied for housing schemes and ration cards and demanded more effective functioning of health centres and schools. After they conducted these activities, they evaluated the results and came up with other ways of solving the problems or, if the problems were solved sufficiently, moved on to address other problems.

In order to support their activities, the APMSS provides 500 rupees per month for three years when *sanghams* want to start collective small-scale income generating activities and their proposed activities meet with criteria set by the APMSS. The reason for this limitation imposed is to encourage them to utilise existing resources and government services. By this time, *sanghams* have opened their own bank accounts to deposit membership fees and funding from the APMSS. As *sanghams* engage in various activities and gain in strength, the *karyakarthis*' role gradually decreases.

Stage IV: Becoming independent

Sanghams continue to conduct activities with gradually less support from *karyakarthis* and the APMSS. The final stage that *sanghams* are expected to reach is independence. The Mahila Samakhya Programme envisages that *sanghams* will progress from the second to the fourth stage in a period of three years, though in reality it can take much longer than that (which will be detailed in the following sections).

In Makthal, *sanghams* were considered able to work on their own and were regarded as independent after 1998. For independent *sanghams*, *karyakarthis* and the APMSS have provided advice and support only when requested.



Group Discussion (b) with the Members of the *Sangham* in Dandu Village

Box 12. Development of a *Sangham* in Lingampalli Village in Makthal Mandal

A *karyakartha* visited Lingampalli village for the first time in July, 1993 [Stage I]. The village had fifty to seventy households of scheduled castes. She visited these households and approached women individually. They talked about various issues and developed relationships. She regularly made such visits and explained about herself, her work and the Mahila Samakhya Programme.

Small groups of women in neighbouring households started coming to see the *karyakartha* whenever she visited the village in 1994. After some time, the women and *karyakartha* found that it was convenient for the small groups of women to meet all together in one place, rather than in different places in the village. Thus, in 1996 eight to ten women began meeting in a large group during the *karyakartha's* visits [Stage II].

The group of women gradually formed into a *sangham* and discussed problems in their homes and communities. They agreed that the most urgent problem to be solved was the lack of ration cards provided for low-income people under the Public Distribution System. Without the cards, they could not get *sarees* and *dhotis* at subsidised prices. They wanted to know how to apply for ration cards immediately. The *karyakartha* helped them make applications.

The *sangham* also decided to talk to the *sarpanch* and the Mandal Revenue Officer about their problem. Though they did not have ration cards, they negotiated with the dealer and the dealer agreed that he would sell *sarees* and *dhotis* at low prices to women. [Stage III]

Source: Fieldwork (2011)

Box 13. Forming a *Sangham* in Karni Village in Makthal Mandal

In Karni village, ten women met with a *karyakartha* after she had visited the village a few times. They were concerned about walking outside at night because of the lack of street lighting. Being encouraged by the *karyakartha*, the ten women went to see the *sarpanch* and asked him to install street lights. He understood the situation and accepted the request. Street lights were subsequently installed. This incident gave the women confidence that they could speak to the *sarpanch* and make requests.

Similarly, they asked to build a bore-well in the area where scheduled castes resided, since there was none. This request too was accepted. This success made them realise that they could solve problems when they stood up and worked together. These achievements led them to organise themselves as a *sangham* in the village.

Source: Fieldwork (2011)

6.4.2. Formation of clusters

The numbers of *sanghams* and of women participating in *sanghams* has dramatically increased in Makthal mandal over the years. Many *sanghams* which were formed earlier moved from the first to the second and third stages. *Sangham* women were provided with opportunities to meet other women from neighbouring villages during meetings and trainings organised by the APMSS. While they shared information and experiences with each other, they found that they were facing the same problems. In order to solve these common problems, they started networking.

Successful joint activities, such as launching large-scale awareness raising campaigns, gave confidence to groups of *sanghams*. Five to eight *sanghams* from neighbouring villages grouped together as clusters, and from 1997, the **governing body members** of each *sangham* started holding cluster meetings on a fixed date each month. Each cluster selected one representative from the governing body. Meeting venues rotated among the villages of the cluster, or some clusters used the money pooled by members and built cluster huts built. When urgent issues came up, *sangham* women met at *shandy* (weekly market) when they went shopping, or at the mandal headquarters when they went there for other purposes.

The stage of each *sangham* in Makthal varied around that time, as shown in Table 7. For example, in 1998, only one *sangham* in the Anugonda cluster had progressed to the second stage, while other *sanghams* remained in the first stage. All of the *sanghams* were in the second stage in the Karni cluster, and all the *sanghams* in the Madwar cluster were in the third stage. The *sanghams* or clusters in advanced stages helped other *sanghams* or clusters in the nascent stages. As such, the *sanghams* and clusters in Makthal helped each other improve their capacities.

As *sanghams* were developing into clusters and becoming more and more self-reliant in conducting activities in Andhra Pradesh, the APMSS facilitated the process of decentralisation by organising meetings, brain-storming sessions, training workshops and exposure visits.



Group Discussion (c) with the Members of the Karni Cluster

6.4.3. Formation of a federation

Meetings continued between *sangham* women and the APMSS between 1997 and 2000 at the village, cluster and mandal levels not only in Makthal mandal but in other areas as well. They discussed the visible changes in the lives of individual *sangham* women, *sanghams* and clusters, as well as in the villages, and the next steps to be taken.

Opinions offered at the meetings were as follows.²⁷

- *Sangham* women have gained knowledge and confidence.
- *Sangham* women have become able to negotiate with *Gram Panchayat* (village council) in order to have access to basic needs.
- *Sanghams* have obtained recognition in the villages.
- *Sanghams* have potential to expand the scope of activities, though they need to be further strengthened.
- Clusters have built their capacity to address common issues, but face difficulties in contacting the police in cases of violence against women and girls.
- If *sanghams* as one group have a presence at the mandal level, it will be easier to access the mandal office, police and judiciary system.
- A mandal-level group of *sanghams* can influence policies and projects to make them women-friendly.
- When the APMSS withdraws itself from the programme areas, the mandal level federation can act as a coordinating body of village *sanghams* and gather support from various external agencies.

Out of these discussions, *sanghams* which became increasingly self-reliant in conducting activities came up with the idea of creating a new structure at the mandal level. They thought that by increasing their capacity they would be able to establish a federation, through which problems of women in villages could be dealt with at the mandal level. *Sangham* women and the APMSS together explored ways of federating *sanghams* and considered the roles and responsibilities of a federation. They also discussed the structure of the federation, the method of choosing representatives, term limits, and other related issues.

A series of discussions between *sangham* women and the APMSS resulted in the formulation of the vision and missions, mentioned earlier. It was also decided that by-laws would be drafted for each federation. Under this direction, the clusters of *sanghams* in Makthal mandal started preparations to establish a federation, registering it as a society, and formulating by-laws with the help of the APMSS in 1999. In 2000, Makthal federation (formally, Swatantra Bharata Mahila Sangham) successfully

²⁷ This information is obtained from the internal document of the APMSS collected during the fieldwork.

registered as a society under the Societies Registration Act 1860 and started activities on its own.

At this mandal level, the **Federation Executive Committee** was established as the highest decision-making body of the federation. It is composed of a total of seven representatives from the seven clusters in Makthal. From these representatives a President, Vice President, Secretary, Joint Secretary and Treasurer are selected. They meet once every two months and have a term of two years.

Another body at the mandal level is the **Governing Body**. It consists of one representative (a governing body member) from each *sangham*. A total number of forty-five representatives hold meetings once a month, but when urgent issues come up, emergency meetings are organised. In addition to these two bodies, all *sangham* women from all clusters gather once a year. This is referred to as the **General Body**.

Initially, some federations, such as the federation in Utkoor mandal in Mahbubnagar district, had only representatives in the clusters of the Governing Body. The reason that Makthal federation chose to have representation from all the *sanghams* was that it thought that every *sangham* should have a say in the Governing Body, though opinions can be communicated via the representatives of the clusters.

Makthal federation views the functions of the clusters as intermediaries between the *sanghams* and the federation as a coordinator of activities conducted throughout the mandal. The federation is also considered to be a forum for capacity building training and sharing of resources. For this purpose, it was decided to establish the Mandal Resource Group which provided their knowledge, skills and experience as resource persons to *sanghams* inside and outside the federations, as well as external bodies. The Mandal Resource Group consists of five representatives, one each from the five Issue Committees which operate at the cluster level.

With regards to financing activities of federations, the APMSS held a workshop for four federations in Mahbubnagar in 2001. Two methods were proposed: contributions from either *sanghams* or *sangham* members. Makthal federation supported the contribution from *sanghams* and others followed suit. Makthal federation has raised funding through membership fees of fifty rupees per month each from the forty-five *sanghams*. They also receive a portion of the remuneration contributed by members who work as resource persons, charge fees for visitors who come to learn from the federation's activities, and obtain contracts on implementation of projects from the APMSS, NGOs and local governments.

6.4.4. Becoming an autonomous federation

The next step for the registered federation was to move towards autonomy. In 2005 and 2006, the APMSS organised brainstorming sessions, workshops and meetings with the women of Makthal federation and assisted them as they worked towards autonomy. Through discussions with the members, they identified needs for further training, partners for networking, and ways to secure financial and human resources. The APMSS provided Makthal federation with further training to increase their capabilities in formulating annual activity plans, documenting annual and project reports, and accounting.

The members of Makthal federation conducted various activities and projects, which, in turn, boosted their capacity towards becoming autonomous. In 2006, the APMSS determined that Makthal federation was strong enough to be independent of the Mahila Samakhya Programme, and withdrew from Makthal mandal.

Now, Makthal federation plans, implements, and evaluates projects independently with its own sources of funding. Internally, the federation monitors and helps *sangham* activities, and externally builds networks with other federations, local NGOs and government offices.

The relationship between Makthal federation and the APMSS remains close. One staff of the State Programme Office attends meetings of the Federation Executive Committee and the Governing Body for one year after federations become independent. Thus, Makthal federation has continued to receive support from the APMSS in order to further strengthen its capacity.



Meetings of Makthal Federation



(Explaining the Structure of the Federation)



(Discussing Issues)



(Theatre Playing: A Landlord (left) and Sangham Women)



(Dancing after the Discussion)

Group Discussion (d) with the Executive Committee Members of Makthal Federation

6.4.5. Evolving into a *Maha Sangham*

In Mahbubnagar, after Makthal federation became a registered society in 2000, three federations were registered as societies in 2001, followed by an additional three in 2006. The seven federations, as front runners of the Mahila Samakhya Programme in Andhra Pradesh, have evolved into a *Maha Sangham*, a network of federations at the district level.

Maha Sangham is comprised of three representatives each from the Federation Executive Committee members. They gather every month. The objectives of the *Maha Sangham* are to function as a pressure group to raise awareness of women's issues in cooperation with other district-level agencies and NGOs, and to help each other in conducting activities in respective mandals.

The representatives of the federations exchange information and experiences, discuss common problems and draw up joint action plans. The plans are implemented by respective federations, and the representatives visit government offices to address problems when necessary. This approach is now replicated in other districts.



Visitors from Uttar Pradesh (left) and Karnataka (right)



Presenting the Experiences of Makthal Federation

Table 7. The Development Process of *Sanghams* in Makthal Mandal

Cluster/ <i>Sangham</i>	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	(1)	(2)
ANUGONDA Cluster (8)																				
Anugonda	---	---	---	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	22	35
Anukinapalli	---	---	---	2	2	2	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	30	50
Daddanpalli	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	36	36
Gaddampalli	---	---	---	---	2	2	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	30	40
Musalaipalli	---	---	---	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	35	40
Panchadevpahad	---	---	---	---	2	2	2	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	28	42
Parevula	---	---	---	2	2	2	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	30	35
Pasupula	---	---	---	2	2	2	2	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	32	38
BHOOTPUR Cluster (7)																				
Bhootpur	---	---	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	30	32
Dandu	---	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	25	35
Katrapalli	---	---	2	---	2	2	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	30	32
Kondadoddi	---	---	---	2	2	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	26	38
Mushtipalli	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	28	40
Rudrasamudram	---	---	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	20	45
Satyaram	---	---	---	2	2	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	25	35
DASARADODDI Cluster (6)																				
Dasaradoddi	---	---	---	2	2	2	2	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	40	45
Chandapur	---	---	---	---	---	2	2	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	25	35
Gurlapalli	---	---	---	---	---	2	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	20	32
Sanghambanda	---	---	---	2	2	2	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	20	46
Tirumalapur	---	---	---	---	---	2	2	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	25	34
Vanaikunta	---	---	---	---	2	2	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	26	35
JAKLER Cluster (6)																				
Gudigandla	---	---	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	17	30
Jakler	---	---	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	22	33
Madanpalli	---	---	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	18	29
Oblapallir	---	---	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	22	27
Ramasamudram	---	---	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	32	40
Samanpalli	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	2	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	23	28

Table 7. The Development Process of Sanghams in Makthal Mandal (continued)

Cluster/Sangham	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	(i)	(ii)
KARNI Cluster (7)																				
Bhagwanpalli	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	15	28
Chityala	---	2	2	3	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	22	42
Ersempalli	---	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	35	38
Ghoplapur	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	18	38
Karni	---	2	2	3	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	28	35
Khanapur	---	2	2	3	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	26	35
Panchalingala	---	2	2	3	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	28	40
MADWAR Cluster (5)																				
Madwar	---	2	2	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	25	38
Makthal	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	2	20
Lingampalli	---	2	2	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	25	35
Someswarabanda	---	2	2	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	30	45
Upparpalli	---	2	2	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	20	28
MANTHANGOUD Cluster (6)																				
Bondalakunta	---	---	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	19	36
Erranpalli	---	---	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	30	35
Gollapalli	---	---	---	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	22	34
Kachvar	---	---	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	26	35
Manthagound	---	---	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	32	43
Tekulapalli	---	---	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	18	28

Source: Fieldwork (2011)

Notes: (1) (i) indicates the number of women at the time of forming the group, and (ii) indicates the number of women in 2010.

(2) The first stage is not mentioned, since records are only available from the second stage.

Box 14. Descriptive Indicators to Assess the Development of *Sanghams* Defined by the APMSS

Stage I: *Rapport building*

- *Karyakarthis* visit villages which the APMSS identifies as the target of the Mahila Samakhya Programme.
- *Karyakarthis* make house visits to women who belong to low castes and explain about the programme.
- *Karyakarthis* also meet with other people, including men of the villages and explain about the programme.

Stage II: *Group formation*

- *Karyakarthis* have regular meetings with small groups of women.
- *Karyakarthis* and women discuss problems that they are facing.
- *Karyakarthis* provide further explanations on the programme, suggesting what women can do to solve problems through participation in the programme.
- Some groups of women start activities to solve the problems.
- Through this interaction between the *karyakarthis* and women, the numbers of women who participate in small groups increase and they meet regularly.

Stage III: *Group activities*

- Small groups of women are consolidated into one group or a *sangham* (25 to 30 members) in a village.
- *Sangham* women decide the names of their *sanghams*.
- *Sangham* women select one representative (governing body member) per *sangham*, and other members are divided into five Issue Committees (education, health, natural resources, *Panchayati Raj*, and social issues).
- *Sanghams* hold meetings once or twice a month on a regular basis.
- *Sanghams* request the APMSS to provide information and training to assist them in conducting activities.
- *Sangham* women contribute a small amount for membership fees.
- *Sangham* women participate in training workshops organised by the APMSS.
- *Sanghams* discuss issues to be addressed and take actions to solve problems.
- *Karyakarthis* gradually reduce their role in activities of *sanghams*.

Stage IV: *Independence*

- *Sanghams* conduct activities independently with advice and help from *karyakarthis* and the APMSS only when requested.

Source: Created by the author from APMSS (1998).

6.5. The development process of individual *sanghams* in Makthal

The APMSS started visiting villages in Makthal mandal in 1993, as the development process of the forty-five *sanghams* is shown in Table 7.²⁸ Ten *sanghams* were formed in 1994, followed by thirteen *sanghams* in 1995 and an additional ten in 1996. Nearly three-quarters of the *sanghams* (33 out of 45) in Makthal were established in the initial three years. Following that, a few *sanghams* were formed in 1997 and 1998. After the federation was established in 2000, new *sanghams* continued to be established: four in 2001 and one in 2002. The newest *sangham* was the one formed in the mandal headquarters, Makthal, in 2010.

When the APMSS starts the Mahila Samakhya Programme in a new mandal, it first visits rural villages, since mandal headquarters are mostly semi-urban and more developed in comparison with surrounding villages. In the case of Makthal mandal, women from scheduled castes residing in the mandal headquarters discussed the possibility of forming a *sangham* in 1995, but decided against doing so because they thought they could solve problems on their own without formally organising themselves into a group. However, after the federation was established, women in Makthal headquarters were able to experience a number of activities taking place in the mandal. Finally in 2009, they decided to organise themselves and formed a *sangham* in 2010.

The *sanghams* in Makthal mandal have expanded in terms of membership. With the exception of two *sanghams*, the number of women in each *sangham* has substantially increased from the initial years to the present by 10.3 women per *sangham* or 44.5% on average, and from 1,156 to 1,620 women in total (see Figure 5). The largest increase is observed in Sanghambanda *sangham* (20 to 46 women or 130.0%), and the size of around one-third of the *sanghams* rose 1.5 times. This suggests that *sangham* activities are attracting more and more women in the villages.

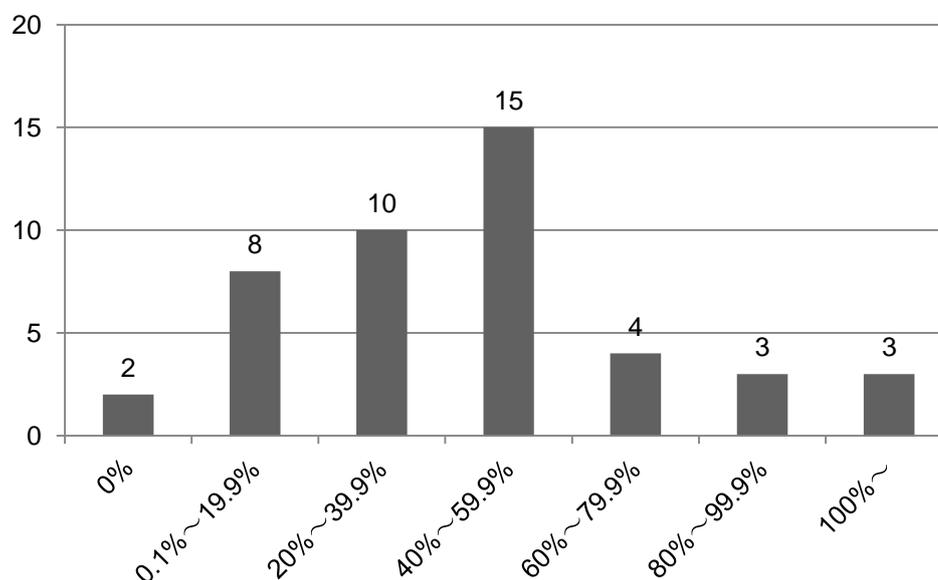
Each year, the APMSS monitors and evaluates the stages that the *sanghams* have reached, according to the descriptive indicators that it defines (see Box 14). Of the 45 *sanghams*, 39 have reached stage IV, as the autonomous federation is expected to progress. Five *sanghams* which are at stage III were formed relatively later in 2000 and 2001, and the newest *sangham* in Makthal headquarters is at stage II.

On average, it takes 2.4 years for the *sanghams* to move from the second to the third stage, and 2.8 years from the third to the fourth stage. It takes 4.9 years from formation to independence. As detailed by Table 8, a typical case shows that a *sangham* reaches the third stage two years after it is formed and requires an additional two to three years to reach the independence stage. The Mahila Samakhya Programme envisions *sanghams* becoming independent in three years after formation, but in reality

²⁸ The data and information were obtained from the staff of the APMSS's head office and of the District Implementation Unit in Mahbubnagar during the fieldwork.

it can take longer (about four to five years). It is, therefore, expected that it will take a few more years before the six *sanghams* at stages II and III will become independent.

Figure 5. Increase in the Number of *Sangham* Members in Makthal Mandal (1994-2010)



Source: Fieldwork (2011)

Table 8. Years Taken to Move up to the Stages

	from Stage II to III	from Stage III to IV	from Stage II to IV
1 year	2	6	0
2 years	29	11	0
3 years	4	15	5
4 years	7	4	10
5 years	1	0	15
6 years	0	1	7
7 years	0	0	0
8 years	0	0	1
9 years	0	0	0
10 years	0	0	0
11 years	0	1	0
12 years	0	0	0
13 years	0	0	1
Total	43	38	39

Source: Fieldwork (2011)

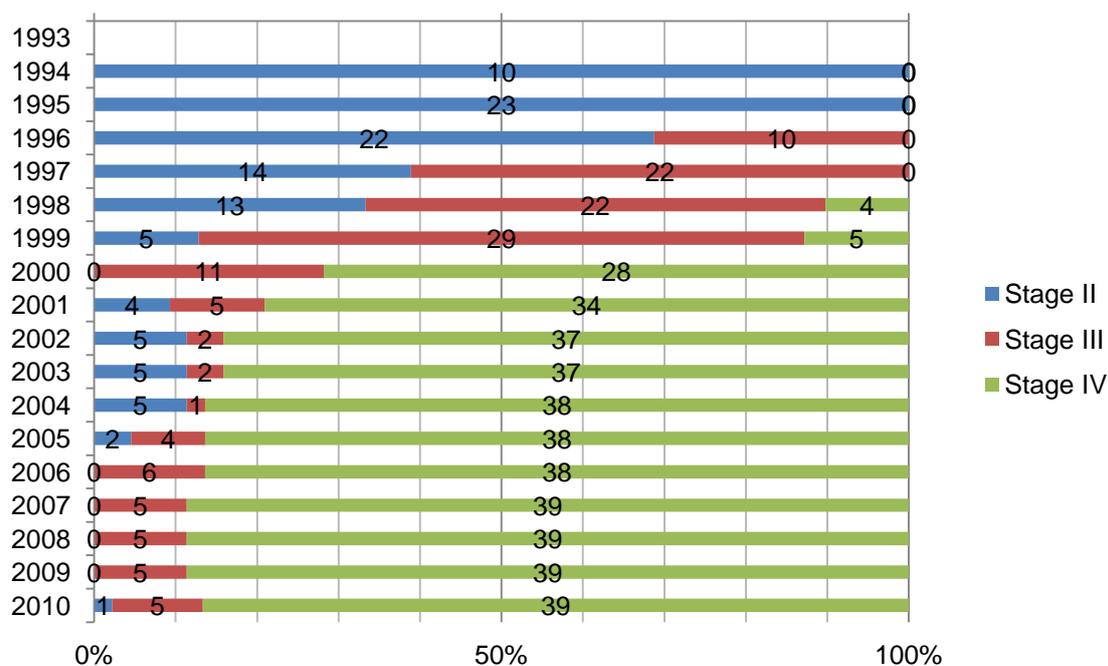
Notes: (1) One *sangham* has not reached stage III and five *sanghams* have not reached stage IV.
 (2) One *sangham* jumped directly from stage II to IV.

The progress made by the *sanghams* in Makthal mandal reflects the development of Makthal federation. Figure 6 shows that only five *sanghams* (12.8%) reached stage IV in 1999 and the number increased to 28 (71.8%) when the federation was established in 2000. The number of *sanghams* further rose to 38 (86.4%) in 2006 when the federation became autonomous.

However, the development of the *sanghams* is not uniform. The majority of *sanghams* moved from stage II to stage III in two to three years, but Gurlapalli *sangham* moved up to the next stage within one year. Alternatively, the longest case was five years for Samanpalli *sangham*.

The number of years required to move from stage III to stage IV varies from one to eleven years. The shortest cases are found in the Dasaradoddi cluster. Out of six *sanghams*, four passed from the third to fourth stage in one year and two in two years. The longest example is Ersenpalli *sangham*. The *sangham* was established in 1994 and reached stage III after two years. However, it took thirteen years to become independent due to disagreements and conflicts among members and between them and their families. Despite these difficulties, Ersenpalli *sangham* has remained united with support from the *karyakarthis* and the APMSS. This is because the members acknowledge that the *sangham* is a space for them to discuss, make decisions and take action in order to solve problems for them and fellow women.

Figure 6. Changes in the Status of the *Sanghams* in Makthal by Year (1993 to 2010)



Source: Fieldwork (2011)

This type of dynamic is also observed in other *sanghams*. Katrapalli *sangham* was first formed in 1995, but in the following year meetings were not held regularly. The *sangham* women started to doubt the value of collective activities as they were unable to have in-depth discussions about problems and potential solutions, and could not sufficiently review activities and observe achievements. In 1996, Katrapalli *sangham* was dissolved. The *karyakartha* increased the number of visits to Katrapalli and thoroughly explained the benefits of the programme again to former members. As a result, they regained interest in collective work, formed a *sangham* again in 1997 and intensified their activities. In particular, they have been very active in political participation. In the elections in 2006, two *sangham* women became *panchayat* members, one became a *sarpanch* and one became a member of the Mandal Parishad Territorial Constituency.

Another *sangham* had a dispute related to an award they had received. The APMSS had to inform the award committee of an individual person's name instead of the name of the *sangham* as an awardee, though they well understood that the group activity was acknowledged. For convenience, it nominated the governing body member at that time. However, some members of the *sangham* were not happy about the award being given to one person and the way the prize money was distributed among the federation, the governing body member and other members, since they thought that the award was the result of group activities, which was true. The APMSS duly explained the reason behind the nomination and re-divided the prize money in a way which was agreeable to all *sangham* members.

Sanghams experience ups and downs even after they are considered independent. One of the earlier *sanghams*, Dandu *sangham*, passed through stage II to III in two years and stage III to IV in three years, and reached stage IV in 1999. However, in 2001, some *sangham* women ran in the *panchayat* election under different political parties. This led to an awkward relationship among the *sangham* members, and they did not attend meetings for a while. They again began gathering regularly, but attendance again decreased when a few women who played leading roles in the *sangham* migrated to other states. Activities picked up again when they returned to Dandu village. However, members' attendance again became erratic. The Executive Committee of the Makthal federation and the APMSS found that the governing body member of the *sangham* did not fulfil her role sufficiently, and decided to replace her. Following the replacement, the *sangham's* activities have since picked up.

On the other hand, Panchadevpahad *sangham* progressed through the stages quickly after its formation in 1997 and became independent in 2000 without advancing through stage III. This was because the women were very motivated and quickly developed their capacity with the help of the *karyakartha*. Their success in accessing

government schemes and services also helped increase momentum, as have shown in the case of Lingampalli *sangham* in Box 12.

6.6. Reasons for federating in Makthal

The women of Makthal federation, having the double disadvantage of being from low castes and also being women, lived in difficult circumstances facing poverty and social discrimination. They gathered as *sanghams* and discussed how to improve their situations. They also shared their problems and experiences with the women of other *sanghams* in neighbouring villages. They found that they faced the same problems and thought that it would be more effective to address common and broad social issues by joining hands, rather than acting alone to try to tackle the issues. This was why *sanghams* in Makthal decided to form clusters and then create a federation according to the members of Makthal federation. For example, one member explained:

“When five *sanghams* of 25 women gather, we are 125. It can be a big force.”
(Group discussion [d])

In concrete, the *sangham* women in Makthal mandal decided to address three issues together—child marriage, the *jogini* system and child labour. Firstly, it was not rare for girls below ten to get married, sometimes with men who were ten or twenty years older than them, though the legal marriageable age in India is defined as eighteen for women and twenty-one for men. One reason is a continued social custom among Hindus: fathers have an obligation to marry off their daughters before puberty. Another reason is the dowry system. Parents have to pay dowries in cash and in kind when their daughters marry, and the dowry becomes larger and larger as the years go by. However, daughters marry into their husband’s family and are not able to support their own parents after marriage. Parents, therefore, tend to marry off their daughters as quickly as possible, rather than keep them at home and spend money to feed and clothe them. However, child marriage deprives girls of educational opportunities and puts their lives at risk due to underage pregnancy, for example.

The second issue was the *jogini* system. *Jogini* means a wife of God. Young girls are offered to God and become wives of God. The *jogini* system is practiced in Makthal and other parts of India under different names, such as *devadasi*, *basivini* and *mathamma*. In Andhra Pradesh, the state government banned the practice by issuing the Andhra Pradesh Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act in 1988, but the practice has continued.

In Makthal, one girl aged seven or eight is offered to God along with sheep twice a year. This means that a total of two girls become *joginis* in one village every year. At one time, as many as twenty-five *joginis* existed in one village. *Joginis* are supposed to get married to God, but in fact they become property of the men in the village. After

girls reach puberty, they are forced to have sexual relationships first with upper caste men and then with other village men. In turn, they are given money, goods or land.

Joginis continue living with their parents and can make economic contributions to their families. Therefore, the eldest daughters of poor families or low castes are likely to be offered as *joginis*. In particular, families which do not have sons tend to think that if daughters become *joginis*, they will stay in village and take care of parents when parents are older and unable to work. Moreover, parents do not need to pay dowries. However, most of *joginis* are not sent to school, and they have difficulties in making a living when they get older as they usually receive fewer and fewer offerings from the villagers.

The third issue was child labour: many girls in Makthal worked in cotton fields and did not go to school. Cotton is one of the major agricultural products in Mahbubnagar district where the land is not fertile and rainfall is low. Girls are favoured for this work, because employers think that their height and nimble fingers are suitable for cross-fertilisation of cotton flowers. However, the real reasons for hiring girls are different: the wages are low; they are docile; and they do not complain and go on strikes like adults

Many chemical fertilisers and pesticides are used in cotton fields, which cause health problems, such as headaches, vomiting and skin diseases. These symptoms became evident in the middle of the 1990s. In Dandu village, one girl who worked in a cotton field died, and a doctor diagnosed the cause of her death as likely related to the effects of inhaling chemicals sprayed in the cotton fields.

The next chapter will report how Makthal federation attempted to solve these three problems.

7. The Process of Empowerment: The Case of Makthal Federation

The Mahila Samakhya Programme is implemented as an education project, but its approach differs from other conventional education projects which provide educational services, such as literacy classes and building schools. The core component of the programme is to empower women by helping them solve their own problems.

Sanghams of Makthal mandal gathered as clusters and then as a federation to address cross-cutting issues across the villages. It is an effective strategy for marginalised women to challenge the status quo. In the process of pushing their causes forward, women are empowered as groups and as individuals. This chapter will analyse how *sangham* women are gaining power.

7.1. Collective actions taken in Makthal

The three common issues in Makthal mentioned in the previous section are not easily solved by a single *sangham* of women who belong to low castes. Child marriage and the *jogini* system are long-practiced customs, and the vested interests of landlords who have power are involved in the issue of child labour. Therefore, the *sangham* women in Makthal mandal decided to take the following collective actions by forming clusters and a federation. As such, the *sanghams* in Makthal have been very active in conducting activities before and after they were united as a federation and have made various achievements. The first sub-section will explain their fights against the three common issues, and the second sub-section will describe other activities.

7.1.1. Fights against common issues in Makthal

Raising awareness

People tend to follow traditional customs and practices without question. They may not be aware of the negative effects caused by child marriage, the *jogini* system and child labour. They may be aware of the problems, but they may not be aware of alternatives. It is, therefore, important to inform people of the adverse impacts on girls' welfare and change their views and attitudes. The *sanghams* in Makthal had discussions with influential people, such as community leaders, religious leaders, and government officials. They also launched various campaigns against child marriage, the *jogini* system and child labour, and advocated for children's schooling.

Actions against child marriage and the jogini system

When *sangham* women hear that young girls are scheduled to get married or to be offered as *joginis* in the village, they go to see their parents and persuade them not to do so by explaining the negative effects of these practices on their daughters and the importance of education. However, they do not always succeed in their efforts. One *karyakartha* in Makthal mandal talked about a difficult experience:

“We went to a village to oppose child marriage. We spoke with the parents and they decided not to marry off their young daughter. But, their relatives and other villagers got angry and did not accept our arguments. They started beating us with their sandals. We pushed our way through the crowd and managed to get into a car. Then, we left the village.” (Group discussion [a])

When *sanghams* face such troubles, they go to the police or the local government for help, since both child marriage and the *jogini* system are prohibited by law. They also seek help from local NGOs. As a result of years of activities, there are now no *jogini* in Makthal mandal. Likewise, the total number of child marriages halted in Mahbubnagar district was 35 in 2008/09 and 12 in 2009/10. The federation still intervenes whenever child marriages take place or girls are offered as *joginis*.

Action against child labour

Sangham women carried out school enrolment campaigns and visited the households which sent children to work in cotton fields. In some villages, they conducted house-to-house surveys to identify out-of-school children. They explained the importance of education and the health problems caused by chemicals used in cotton fields, and convinced parents to withdraw their children from this kind of work and enrol them in school. They also asked landlords not to hire children.

It was not easy, however, to eradicate child labour immediately. Some families were so poor that they needed their children's earnings, and other families were reluctant to send their daughters to school. Parents tended to think that educating daughters was waste of money, since daughters were married off sooner or later. The *sanghams*, therefore, opened Bala Mitra Kendrams in their villages as a temporary measure. Working children could learn in the evenings after work, and could be mainstreamed in formal schools after some time. Girls who stopped working were placed in the Mahila Shikshana Kendram.

For children enrolled in formal schools, Makthal federation helps improve the quality of education of government schools. They monitor teacher's attendance and the quality of their teaching, and if proper school meals are provided. This is important to prevent children from dropping out of school and ensures their learning achievements.

The death of a girl in Dandu village, which was mentioned earlier, gave major momentum to activities against child labour in cotton fields. All the *sanghams* in Makthal mandal staged a rally and disseminated the message of the danger of the work. Some villagers, particularly, landlords of cotton fields, felt threatened and took their anger public. However, the *sangham* women lobbied hard for the hiring of adult women instead of children, to which the landlords eventually agreed. As a result, now all children (girls and boys) go to school in Makthal mandal and many of them study up to the 10th grade. This is a great achievement, given that the percentage of school-going children aged between five and fourteen is only 59.9% in Mahbubnagar as a whole (GOAP, 2008).

Box 15. Fight against the *Jogini* System in Karni Village

There was a family which lost their only son to a snake bite. They decided to offer their nine-year old daughter to God as a *jogini*. A *karyakartha* of Karni village heard of this and informed the *sangham* women. They spoke with the parents of the girl and asked the parents to reconsider the decision, but the parents said that they should not interfere with the matter. The *sangham* women went to see the *sarpanch* and *patwari* (land record officer) and asked them to convince the parents. Although they were not very supportive of the *sangham* women, they spoke with the parents, but the parents did not change their mind.

As a solution, two village leaders proposed that the ceremony would take place only this one time and that they would ensure that it would not happen again. The *sangham* responded that the girl could be sent to a residential school managed by the APMSS or the government where she could study free of charge, but this idea was rejected by the villagers and the parents.

The *sangham* did not know what to do. Opinions were divided within the *sangham*: some wanted to continue with their efforts, while others did not want to do so. The *sangham* decided to leave the issue. The *karyakartha* then warned them if they stopped protesting, the APMSS would withdraw from the village.

The *sangham* women reconsidered and decided to stage a *dharna* (protest) in front of the police station. They said that anybody who supported the initiation of the *jogini* should “walk over their dead bodies” to attend the ceremony. A local newspaper became to know that the *sangham* women and the APMSS were trying to stop the *jogini* ceremony, and covered the *sangham*'s protest at the police station in the newspaper.

The police and *panchayat* members discussed the issue and said they would leave the decision up to the *sangham*. The *sangham* again asked the parents to stop offering the daughter as a *jogini* and they complied.

A few days later, the *sangham* found out that the ceremony was scheduled to take place with the consent of a sub-inspector of the police. The *sangham* women went to see the sub-inspector and questioned him. He said that it was only a wedding, not an initiation of a *jogini*. The *sangham* women and the *karyakartha* threatened that they would call all the *sangham* women in Makthal and stage a *dharna* if it were the *jogini* ceremony.

The police took the people concerned into custody: the parents, the priest who was supposed to perform the ceremony and village leaders who intended to proceed with the ceremony. The villagers were frightened by this move and decided to stop the ceremony. Those who were arrested were released. Since then, no ceremony has taken place in Karni village.

Sources: APMSS (1999) and fieldwork (2011)

7.1.2. Activities conducted by Makthal federation

Managing a Mahila Shikshana Kendram in Makthal

The Mahila Shikshana Kendram was opened in Mahbubnagar in 1995 and was managed by the APMSS. Between 2002 and 2005, it was jointly managed by the APMSS and Makthal federation. In 2006, Makthal federation started running its own Mahila Shikshana Kendram in Makthal with a grant-in-aid from the APMSS. Before it closed in 2009, 110 adolescent girls had been mainstreamed in formal schools (Fieldwork, 2011). Now some girls from Makthal are studying in the Mahila Shikshana Kendram in Mahbubnagar.



Group Discussion (e) with the Girls Studying at Mahila Shikshana Kendram in Mahbubnagar

Box 16. Visit to Mahila Shikshana Kendram in Mahbubnagar

Mahila Shikshana Kendram (MSK) in Mahbubnagar is located on the ground floor of the District Implementation Unit's office. Thirty-five students aged between ten and eighteen study with three teachers, including one residential teacher. Most of them had worked as agricultural wage labourers, before they joined the MSK.

At the time of the visit to the MSK, two girls who graduated from the residential school came to see their friends. One girl introduced herself: she dropped out after completing the 7th class because there was no high school in the village and her parents did not allow her to continue studying. She started working in cotton fields. With the help of *sangham* women, she was able to join the MSK. Now, she studies computing at a higher secondary vocational school. Like her, many girls obtain opportunities for education at MSKs and successfully complete their education.

In a group discussion (January 7, 2011) with the girls of the MSK, when asked if they had experienced misfortune as girls, many girls talked about the differences in the treatment between them and their brothers.

“Brothers study at school, but we do agriculture work.”

“After marriage, boys stay at their parents' home, but girls have to go to other families.”

When asked if they had had good experiences as girls, the girls did not respond immediately. After repeating the question a few times and waiting for a while, only a couple of girls replied. One said,

“Girls can put flowers in their hair.”

This kind of response was expected. Perhaps, many girls in developed countries would instantly say that wearing fashionable clothes or makeup is an advantage.

Then, another girl said,

“Boys only play outside, but girls work at home. So, girls can make their parents happy.”

This statement first shows the difference in behaviour between boys and girls, which could be an answer to the first question—bad experience as being girls. However, this girl thinks that it is a good experience because her parents are happy and that when they are happy, she is content.

An observation of Indian women by Sen (1990) was referred to earlier in chapter 2.3. Women who are subjugated often do not have a sense of their own identity and tend to think of their happiness in terms of their family's happiness. This applies to the girl at the MSK. She believes that what is good for her parents is also good for her. She does not think about whether she herself is happy in her role.

During the group discussion, however, some girls had their own message:

“Parents should treat boys and girls equally.”

This is what the Mahila Samakhya Programme aims to achieve. It is hoped that the next generation of would-be members of *sanghams* study well and take over where their mothers' and aunts' activities have left off.

Source: Fieldwork (2011)

Collective farming: the Samatha Dharani Project

Makthal mandal was selected as one of the project areas of the Samatha Dharani Project which was implemented between 2000 and 2005.²⁹ The *sanghams* in Makthal were provided with agricultural equipment, skill training and small loans in order to start collective farming. They produced food crops through organic farming and collectively stored grains. They could increase food security and also earn income.

Moreover, this project strengthened the relationship between the *sanghams*. In this project, small agricultural equipment was provided to each village, but large machines provided had to be used by *sanghams* in several villages in rotation, which opened up the lines of communication between *sanghams* in neighbouring villages.

Box 17. Mango Nursery in Mahbubnagar

Five mandals in Mahbubnagar were selected for the Samatha Dharani Project. *Sanghams* in these mandals started mango nurseries to generate income. *Sangham* women underwent training for growing mangos over a twenty-day period, followed by a fifteen-day training programme to develop grafting skills. With a successful marketing strategy, they made a profit from selling mangoes. Part of the profit was pooled by the *sanghams* and used to expand the nursery in subsequent years.

Source: Indian Council of Agriculture Research (2004)

Raising wages for agricultural labour

Many women of the *sanghams* in Makthal are from low castes. They were obliged to accept whatever wages landlords from high castes paid. Sometimes, they were not even paid for their work. When *sangham* women in one village decided not to work for certain landlords, women from other villages who wanted to earn came to their village and took up the work. So, the women, for example in Karni village, discussed this issue with the *sangham* women in neighbouring villages and decided to take joint action: all of them would not work. They did this during the agricultural peak season. As a result, the landlords who definitely needed workers agreed to raise the wage rate.

Becoming panchayat members

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment of India stipulates that one-third of the seats of *panchayat* shall be reserved for women. The APMSS has worked to engage *sangham*

²⁹ See chapter 5.3.

women in local governance from the beginning. It provides training to candidates and those who are elected. In Makthal, only two *sangham* women were elected as *panchayat* members in 1995; this number had increased to six by 2001. In 2006, in addition to sixteen women who were elected as *panchayat* members, one became *sarpanch* and two became members of the Mandal Parishad Territorial Constituency (Fieldwork, 2011).

Sangham women conduct election campaigns together with their fellow candidates and pre-election voter awareness campaigns with the help of the APMSS. Thus, they can garner votes not only from *sangham* members but also other women in their villages. The members of Makthal federation who have become *panchayat* members have worked to improve women's lives. They have been actively involved in local governance by planning and presenting women-friendly projects, monitoring implementation, and seeking accountability for governance.

Breaking the caste barrier

The members of Makthal federation challenge inequalities in society. Discrimination against people from low castes is one issue they are consistently up against. There are a number of cases in which the relationships in villages in Makthal mandal have changed. For example, upper-caste people and low-caste people did not eat from the same pot, and upper caste people were reluctant to drink tea with glasses used by low caste people. This practice still continues in conservative areas.

In Khanapur village, a tea shop served tea with separate glasses for people of scheduled castes and others. The *sangham* women lodged a complaint with the Mandal Development Office with the help of the *karyakartha*. The official came to Khanapur village and held a meeting with the *sangham* women and senior people in the village. After his visit, there was a heated discussion in the village, but in the end people accepted the *sangham* women's demands and the tea shop started serving tea with the same glasses for everybody. Similarly, one restaurant refused entrance to low-caste people. *Sangham* women strongly demanded that they should be able to eat at the restaurant, and the owner of the restaurant eventually bowed to their demands. Now, anybody can have their meals and tea at this restaurant.

Mahila Court

Makthal federation established Mahila Court in 2003³⁰ as one of the first three in Andhra Pradesh. The members of the Mahila Court Committee gather and discuss how to settle cases brought to the court every fifteen days. It resolved 145 cases, such as

³⁰ See chapter 5.5.

child marriage, disputes between married couples, and dowry related violence between 2008 and 2010 (Fieldwork, 2011).

Starting the Mahila Samakhya Programme in Dharur mandal

A new initiative taken up by Makthal federation is to start the Mahila Samakhya Programme in a neighbouring mandal, Dharur, on behalf of the APMSS. In 2007, Makthal federation submitted a proposal for this project to the APMSS. The APMSS accepted the proposal and provided a grant-in-aid. The federation established a committee to implement the programme and set up an office in Dharur. It identified programme villages and candidates for *karyakarthas* with the help of the APMSS. The members of the federation went to the villages and introduced the programme by organising *kalajatha* (folk theatre).

This is the first attempt by the federation in Andhra Pradesh, and there have been difficulties in implementing the programme in a new mandal. However, Makthal federation is working hard with the help of the *Maha Sangham* and the APMSS. Thus far, fifty-five *sanghams* have been formed in Dharur (APMSS, 2011).



The Office in Dharur

Box 18. Projects and Activities Conducted by Makthal Federation

2000-	Mahila Court 145 cases resolved between 2008 and 2010.
2003-04	<i>Kalajathas</i> on Education and Enrolment contracted by Naandi Foundation (NGO) Enrolled 840 children (536 girls and 304 boys) in 10 mandals.
2006-09	Mahila Sikshana Kendram in Makthal contracted by the APMSS Mainstreamed 110 adolescent girls into formal schools.
2007-	Mahila Samakhya Programme in Dharur mandal contracted by the APMSS Formed 55 <i>sanghams</i> and started five Adult Learning Centres.
2008	Residential Bridge Course under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan Enrolled 95 children in school.

Sources: APMSS (2009; 2010b) and fieldwork (2011)

7.2. Empowering women in Makthal federation

Sanghams of Makthal federation have been empowered educationally, economically, politically and socially through their activities to solve problems that women face. At the same time, individual women have been empowered by joining the activities and experiencing a sense of accomplishment from their achievements. This sub-section will examine how individual *sangham* women are being empowered on the basis of the information collected from the group discussions.

7.2.1. Empowerment as perceived by the women of Makthal federation

Empowerment is a difficult term to define and is used in various ways under different economic, socio-cultural and political contexts. When discussing empowerment of women, issues raised include mobility, control over their lives and bodies, access to and control over assets, freedom of choice and decision-making power. It was interesting to ask how the women of Makthal federation perceive empowerment. Their responses show psychological, social and political aspects of empowerment, as follows.

“To grow as a person.”

“To learn things which I had not known.”

“To be able to question.”

“To make decisions for myself, at the family and village levels.”

“To take part in the development process.”

The next question involved the ways that women can be empowered. It was not easy for the women to give answers immediately, but a few of them responded, saying through “education,” “gender workshops,” and “in-depth analysis,” and by “solving individual and family problems with the involvement of *sanghams*.” This is exactly what the Mahila Samakhya Programme provides in order to empower women and enable them to redress inequalities in society.

Education in this programme is defined broadly (see chapter 5.1) and is close to the concept of Freire (see chapter 2.1). Participating women share problems, analyse causes of the problems, learn, find solutions, take action and reflect. They learn to take actions, and this learning process empowers them. A story of one woman who became a *karyakartha* summarises the process of *sangham* women being empowered.

“I was married at fourteen years old. I had to listen to my husband and in-laws and had little freedom. I was scared to talk to men and did not go out of the house often. After joining a *sangham*, I have learnt about the rights of women and children and many other things. Now, I can teach others and feel confident speaking to other people.” (Group discussion [a])

Sangham women can become resource persons through training, as well as *karyakarthis*. Those who joined *sanghams* being motivated by *karyakarthis* now help other women. Among the women interviewed, several of them said that they worked as *karyakarthis* or had experience being employed for projects by local governments and NGOs. They said that more and more *sangham* women wanted their daughters to be educated and become *karyakarthis*. This is a virtuous cycle: the programme is being handing over from generation to generation and spreading the philosophy of the Mahila Samakhya Programme. It is certainly an achievement of the programme in empowering women.

7.2.2. Aspects of empowerment observed for the women in Makthal federation

Women who participate in *sanghams* in Makthal mandal have gained power in the process of forming clusters and the federation while conducting activities to solve their problems. How they have been empowered will be analysed in terms of the five aspects of empowerment which were presented in chapter 2.3.

Social empowerment

The stories from the women of Makthal federation are mostly related to social aspects of empowerment. Firstly, many of them raised the issue of increased mobility. In Indian rural villages, women tend to stay home and lack information outside the household. In Andhra Pradesh, *pardah*³¹ is not strictly practiced in comparison with northern states, which can be a reason for the high female labour participation rate. However, it is not common for women—alone or in groups—to go out of their villages or even their homes.

According to the women in the group discussions, the Mahila Samakhya Programme provides them with opportunities to see the outside world.

“I rarely went out from home before. After joining the *sangham*, I started going out for meetings and training.”

“I knew little about things outside the home. I was happy to visit big cities like Hyderabad and Delhi with *sangham* members.”

Similarly, the second point is freedom of expression. According to social customs, it is expected that women will not speak freely with men who are not family members. *Sangham* women used to be fearful of speaking to senior people, such as landlords, village chiefs and government officials, since they were from low castes and many of them were not educated. By participating in meetings, trainings and activities, the

³¹ *Purdah* (which means “curtain”) is a social custom which conceals women from the eyes of men who are not family members. For example, men and women are separated in different rooms in public places, and women are not allowed to go out of the home.

women in the group discussions said that they were able to speak to people whom they had not been able to before.

“Now, I have no fear when speaking with others.”

“I can articulate problems to *panchayat* members.”

“I did not go out of the house and I was scared to talk to men, but now I can make demands and negotiate with government officials.”

Thirdly, many women talked about their own learning experiences.

“I have learnt many things.”

“I have become aware of the problems women face and the problems in society.”

“I have become aware of governmental acts and rights for women and children.”

The women of Makthal federation who used to stay at home and have little relationship with the outside world have gained knowledge and become aware of various problems by going out for meetings and training.

Fourthly, it was observed that the women have broadened their views and developed relationships with other people. As they grow individually, they start thinking about the ways that they can contribute to others.

“I was self-centred, but now I am thinking of problems in society.”

“I have gained skills and can teach others.”

“I can guide people and work for other women.”

“We can take collective action with courage and support each other.”

The above stories show how marginalised women alleviate their fears of going out and speaking out, gain strength individually, and participate in society. Their social empowerment has led to activities, such as protests against child marriage, the *jogini* system, child labour and caste discrimination, and the establishment of Mahila Court, whereas these activities enhance their abilities.

Economic empowerment

Economic activities certainly serve as a strong incentive for women to join groups and continue group activities, as seen in the cases of the Grameen Bank and Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), which was mentioned in chapter 2.4. The Mahila Samakhya Programme, however, does not include saving and credit as a compulsory component, except for the *sanghams* which were formed for this purpose as self-help groups under other government projects and have been converted into *sanghams* under the Mahila Samakhya Programme. This programme does not place

particular emphasis on vocational skills trainings for income generation either.³² A question may be raised as to why *sangham* women have committed themselves to group activities which do not appear to be economically beneficial to them, though they are able to grow and solve their daily problems.

The fieldwork found that though the programme may not bring about direct economic benefits to *sangham* women, but it does indirectly benefit them in several ways. One example is that the women in Makthal succeeded in increasing wage rates for agriculture labour by negotiating with landlords. Another example is that the *sanghams* were chosen as beneficiaries of the Samatha Dharani Project, which was implemented by an external agency, since *sanghams* were known for its achievements and was entrusted with the success of the project. As expected, *sangham* women were able to gain income through collective farming. This increases the possibility that the *sanghams* in Makthal will be chosen as targets for other projects in the future.

Furthermore, the APMSS encourages *sanghams* to utilise government services and demand fair and effective services. The central and state governments have various schemes for low-income and low-caste families, such as rations for food, housing and employment.³³ In order to access these services, they need to have information on these schemes, fill out application forms and submit them to government offices. However, many poor and low-caste people do not have such information, are not able to read and write, and do not know how to apply for the schemes. They have reservations about visiting government offices, since they are afraid that officials will not treat them well. As a result, they do not benefit from the public services that are available to them.

The APMSS provides *sanghams* with information and training to access public services. For example, within one year after the Mahila Samakhya Programme started in Andhra Pradesh, 800 women applied for schemes to construct toilets (Purushothaman, 2010: 13). Some of the women in the group discussions said that they had toilets or houses built by using the government schemes. They also shared stories that they went to government offices and asked officials to properly provide health services to them and their families. By availing themselves of existing government schemes and services and demanding the improvement of services, the lives of the *sangham* women were improved.

In the group discussions, there were few comments by the women regarding the economic benefits of the Mahila Samakhya Programme. This was expected, because the programme's prime objective is not economic empowerment. However, the programme

³² The situation varies from state to state. For example, in Bihar, the Mahila Samakhya Programme trains *sangham* women to become masons which is traditionally an occupation considered to be for men.

³³ Under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, *panchayats* issue job cards to households. The card mentions members of the household who seek employment. Those who are listed in the card are eligible to obtain a hundred days of work from governments and are paid minimum wage.

does provide opportunities for *sangham* women to improve their economic situations through the activities mentioned above and others. This is certainly considered to be an incentive for women to participate in *sangham* activities.

Political empowerment

The objectives of most projects for women concerns physical, social and economic aspects of empowerment, with psychological and political empowerment often reported as by-products. In other words, satisfying practical gender needs is the primary objective, and satisfying strategic gender needs can be the secondary objective, or may not even be an explicit aim. It is noteworthy that the Mahila Samakhya Programme explicitly includes political empowerment as a component of the programme.

It is, however, not easy for women, even those with high educational levels in developed countries, to enter the political world where men occupy the majority. There are many obstacles, such as psychological barriers, and difficulties in balancing household work and the long hours required to work as political representatives and raising funds for election campaigns, for women to run for elections. It was thought that great courage was necessary for marginalised women to decide to be candidates.

In the group discussions with the women of the federation, when asked the reasons for running in elections, those who were elected representatives gave almost the same response:

“We had problems in villages like lack of drainage and safe drinking water. We appealed to *panchayat* members many, many times, but nothing was done. I thought that I had to become a member and change the *panchayat*. So, we can put women’s problems on the front burner.”

The motivation for them to run for election was their desire to solve women’s problems and improve their own lives.

Although the quota system enables women to participate in local governance, there has been resistance from men. A woman who served as a *panchayat* member for two terms talked about her difficult experience (also see Box 19).

“When I decided to run for election, I was ‘abducted’ from home and kept in a place in the village. I was there for three days without food. They wanted me to withdraw my candidacy, but I did not give in. *Sangham* members rescued me and I was able to go home. After I was elected as a member of *panchayat*, I was not given any information, even dates of meetings. Again *sangham* members and the APMSS went to speak with the male members. Then, they started informing me of meeting dates and other relevant information.” (Group discussion [d])

Box 19. Female *Sarpanch* in Neradgam Village in Mahbubnagar District

A *sangham* was formed in Neradgam village in 1996. The member women are from scheduled castes, backward castes and Muslims. One active member of a backward caste completed 7th class, while almost all other women had no education. She was nominated by the member women to run for a *panchayat* election in 2001. She won a seat and was also elected as *sarpanch later*.

Initially she received support from the villagers and some *panchayat* members. However, the former *sarpanch* started interfering and elders in the village stopped cooperating. Different castes had different interests in village politics, and her in-laws were not supportive. Most of all, people with deep-rooted patriarchal values were not happy about a women being *sarpanch*. This situation was prevalent in many rural villages.

When the fund for constructing roads was released to the *panchayat*, some people wanted to use the funds for other purposes. She was subsequently blamed for misusing the fund and her in-laws spread gossip that she had had an extramarital affair. However, she stood strong against such harassment. *Sangham* women supported her throughout her struggles, and her husband who had not been supportive earlier changed his mind, because of her strong determination to work for the development of the village.

She successfully had the construction of roads and drainages completed, and also had *Anganwadi** and a community hall built during her term. The development of the village was so visible that the villagers selected her as a candidate for the election of the Zilla Parishad Territorial Constituency in 2006. She won the election, and said:

“It was an every day struggle to deal with villagers who were not cooperative, but I did not give in. I continued working for my village, because *sangham* members were with me and gave me tremendous strength.”

Source: APMSS (2009: 31)

* *Anganwadi* is a child- and mother-care centre managed by the government. It provides information on health, nutrition and immunisation, and nutritious food for babies and small children.

There are also criticisms that women’s participation in *panchayat* via the quota system is only in the name. The situation of male-dominated *panchayat* has not changed: women are elected as representatives, but their husbands actually attend *panchayat* meetings, and at the meetings, female representative have little or no say in discussions and decisions are made by male representatives. An attempt to change such situations has been reported by a woman of a federation in Medak district (Purushothaman, 2010: 28). When she became a member of *panchayat*, she saw husbands of women representatives attending meetings, who then signed on their behalf.

She raised this issue at the meeting and got a resolution passed that said that “only the actual ward members should come for the meeting, not their relatives.”

The APMSS, therefore, works to send *sangham* women to *panchayats* and continues extending support after they are elected. It tries to ensure that they can fulfil their responsibilities as elected representatives and play a role in improving women’s situations by offering training on *panchayat*, roles and responsibilities as *panchayat* members, literacy skills and legal literacy. Federations, clusters and *sanghams* also serve as a place where women can develop leadership skills. All the posts in these groups are rotated among the members. They have opportunities to experience various roles, for example as a representative of a *sangham*, as an Issue Committees member, and as a Federation Executive Committee members.

In the group discussions, there were statements related to increasing skills and abilities to exercise political power.

“Now, I know how to plan and implement projects.”

“I can coordinate different people and institutions from the village to the district levels.”

Taking advantage of the opportunities for political participation, *sangham* women have entered the political world and exert some influence, while increasing their capabilities and gaining experience.

Physical empowerment

Health was the main area of the Mahila Samakhya Programme’s activities in early years, since many women and their families suffered from ill health due to lack of knowledge of and access to health services. The programme provided a series of training workshops and launched awareness raising campaigns.

The women in the group discussions, however, did not particularly mention improvements in their own health status, perhaps because the issue was addressed many years ago and is no longer a major concern. Only one woman talked about changes in her lifestyle in relation to the restrictions that low-caste people faced. She said that upper-caste people did not want to see low-caste people, including herself, look clean and neat. So, she did not care much about her appearance and clothing. After she joined a *sangham* and learnt about hygiene, she started taking a bath every day and washing her clothes frequently.

Her power to withstand the discrimination from upper castes suggests that she was empowered socially. Economic empowerment also contributes to improvement of health conditions, for example by being able to eat sufficiently and consume nutritious food. Given these positive impacts from other aspects of empowerment, it can be considered that the *sangham* women have also been empowered physically.

Psychological empowerment

Many women in the group discussions said that they have grown by learning through the training and activities under the Mahila Samakhya Programme; not only by obtaining academic knowledge or literacy skills, but also by developing as human beings or psychologically. Behind the social, economic, political and physical aspects of empowerment mentioned earlier, aspects of their psychological empowerment are also observed. They can go out, speak out, negotiate, demand and run for elections, because they gain self-esteem and confidence.

Group activities and collective action are a strategy to give marginalised women strength. This is evident from a statement of one woman of the Karni cluster:

“When our husbands said that they would not send our children to school, we could not say anything before. Now, we can stand up and say, ‘If you do not support our children’s schooling, *sanghams* can take care of it and the government can take care of it. So, we will educate our children.’” (Group discussion [c])

How one woman can be empowered in the Mahila Samakhya Programme is clearly attested to by the story of a woman who is a member of the Executive Committee of Makthal federation and is considered a role model. Here is her life story:

“My father migrated out of the village, and my mother collected cow dung to sell to feed me, my two sisters and one brother. We were poor and all of us were illiterate. Rice was luxury and we usually ate jowar (sorghum). We also faced restrictions in our behaviours, because we were *dalits* (outcastes). We were told by upper caste people that we should not take baths or comb our hair.

I did not go to school, because the school was far and had only one teacher. There was discrimination against children from low castes. Also, my parents were not interested in education. I got married at nine years old and then my husband left me.

My mother was a member of a *sangham*. They opened a Bala Mitra Kendram in our village. After learning at Bala Mitra Kendram, I joined the government school and learnt up to 5th class. I also took part in a *bala sangham*. Then, I myself became a member of the *sangham* in 1994. At that time, in front of upper caste landlords, we were not allowed to wear sandals, dress well and go to temples. We were verbally abused. Wages were low. But, we had to listen to whatever the landlords said. So, I became interested in solving this and other problems.

I was illiterate and had bad habits like chewing betel leaves, but after going to school and becoming a member of the *sangham* I have changed. I continued studying by distance education. I wanted to help other women and became a

karyakartha. I told women about deliveries at hospitals, diets for pregnant women, immunisation of children, and so on. I worked for projects by other NGOs, too.”
(Group discussion [d])

She was from a low caste family and faced discrimination. She was not sent to school and was got married at an early age. However, she educated herself and grew by experiencing various positions as a governing body member of the cluster and a resource person. She also obtained short-term jobs in government departments and NGOs as a communications specialist. In 2000 and 2005, she was elected as a member of *panchayat* and served two terms of ten years. Now, she is a member of the Executive Committee of Makthal federation and works to help other women, while she is studying to obtain her Bachelor degree through distance education. She hopes to get a job in the government in the future.

When asked why she did not to run for a *panchayat* election the third term, she said she wanted to give way to others. Her decision exemplifies the spirit of the Mahila Samakhya Programme: one person does not hold a position forever, but members can take different responsibilities in turn. It is hoped that the next-generation leaders will appear, while she takes on leadership in Makthal federation.

7.3. Broad impacts of the federation’s activities in Makthal

Ten *sanghams* with 1,156 women started activities under the Mahila Samakhya Programme in Makthal mandal in 1994. They belonged to low castes, were small in number and did not have much influence. Eighteen years later, forty-five *sanghams* have been federated with a membership of 1,620. *Sangham* women have been empowered as groups and as individuals, as seen in the previous sections. However, there are only thirty to forty *sangham* members in one village with a population of around a thousand. Impacts of their activities can be quite limited.

The fieldwork found that families of *sangham* members, their villages and beyond have undergone certain changes according to the members. As the presence of Makthal federation becomes more visible, it can exert certain influence on local governance.

Firstly, both *sangham* women and other women are empowered to certain extent. Restrictions on women’s mobility imposed by social customs have decreased for women as a whole in Makthal mandal after *sangham* women started going out to attend meetings and training in their own and other villages. Women can go outside the home more frequently and with more freedom than before.

Secondly, the attitudes of their families and villages towards their newly-found freedom and confidence have become positive. Some family members of *sangham* women initially opposed their participation in the Mahila Samakhya Programme. They

thought women should stay at home and do household work. They did not like seeing women going out often and found little or no value in *sangham* activities. However, they saw that safe drinking water became available in many areas, schools properly functioned, and families could gain additional income through collective farming. Upon recognising these benefits of *sangham* activities, it appears that the attitudes of family members and villages have changed.

The *sangham* women in Makthal said that they felt that their positions within the household are better than before. Their husbands help with household work. They are respected by other family members. They can make decisions. As an example of changes in the thinking and behaviours of family members, one woman who became a *panchayat* member said that her husband supported her political activities by going with and picking up her when she attended *panchayat* meetings. One woman of the Karni cluster laughingly said:

“Men used to dominate everywhere. Now, women are becoming stronger.”
(Group discussion [c])

Changes in the behaviour of government officials were also mentioned by a member of Makthal federation, Executive Committee.

“Earlier, we begged government officials when we asked them to do something. They had no respect to us. But now, we just say to them. ‘Do it! Be careful about us [Makthal federation].’” (Group discussion [c])

The officials used to look down on *sangham* women. When the women wanted to ask something, they had to literally beg. But now, they can talk to officials on equal terms.

Thirdly, *sanghams* contribute to the empowerment of others. A woman who was a member of the Executive Committee of Makthal federation and was elected as a *panchayat* member said that when she joined the *panchayat*, other members did not know how to plan, budget and implement projects (Group discussion [d]). She explained how it should be done, a direct result of what she had learnt through the Mahila Samakhya Programme. In the beginning the male *panchayat* members appeared to be sceptical about the ability of the newly elected female member, but later even the *sarpanch* asked her to train them on project planning and implementation.

Fourthly, women’s voices and concerns are being reflected in local policies. As the numbers of female *panchayat* members and of women who participate in *Gram Sabha*³⁴ increases, the beliefs that “women are not suitable for politics” and “*panchayat* is a place of men” have been overturned. Earlier, *panchayats* which were dominated by men were more interested in constructing roads and buildings than the issues of drinking

³⁴ This is the lowest administrative body at the village level. People who reside in the village and register their names in the voters’ list meet at least twice a year to review the work of the *panchayats*.

water, health and education, but this situation has changed as shown by a women's statement. This is also reported in the other district.

“When men think of development, they think of roads, building and structures and women think of development as water, health and education.”
(Purushothaman, 2010: 28)

A group of *sangham* women in the Karni cluster appreciated the work of a fellow member who became a *panchayat* member. They said that she went around the village two to three days a week. She asked if elderly people received pensions, checked if bulbs of street lights were working, and tried to find out if anybody had problems they needed help with. The issues which are important to and close to women's lives are well taken care of.



Panchayat Member (centre)

7.4. Future direction of Makthal federation

The women of Makthal federation have united and fought for their cause despite sometimes facing violence and harassments. They have brought about changes in their lives, families and villages. They have become confident, able to negotiate with senior people in the villages and government officials, and realised that their activities can make a difference. *Karyakarthis* and other staff of the APMSS have also increased their capacities by working together with *sangham* women. Other women in villages too, have begun feeling that women can elicit results by seeing the achievements made by *sangham* women.

Thus, *sangham* women have been empowered physically, psychologically, socially, economically, and politically, which have had positive effects on those surrounding them. Their success stories are attributed to a few factors. The first and foremost factor is the strong sense of social justice and spirit of volunteerism. They voluntarily participate in *sangham* activities, because they acknowledge the benefits. When asked the good points of joining *sanghams*, many women in the group discussions responded, “It is good for me to develop by learning various things and to be able to help others.”

Secondly, *sangham* activities are recognised by fellow women, villages and government officials and are able to gain support from them. This is because *sanghams* work not for money but for social justice and show visible results.

The women in the group discussions believe that they are the best among the federations in Andhra Pradesh and even think that they do better than the Mahila

Samakhya Programme. They are proud of their achievements: all children in Makthal mandal go to school; they can prevent child marriage and girls from being offered as *joginis*; and their lives are improving with wage increases and efficient government services.

Makthal federation, however, understands the issues to be addressed in order to further improve their activities and women's lives in Makthal and beyond. When the women of the federation were asked what they would like to do in the future, they mentioned a few issues of concern. One is the large percentage of illiterates among the members. In order to increase the capacity of the federation, clusters and *sanghams*, literacy education is very important. The second issue is that recently many women have been having operations to have uterus and ovaries removed when they think they are finished having children, though this may cause health problems. It is necessary to provide information on reproductive health. The third issue raised is that there are around 200 unmarried women aged between 25 and 35 who are former *joginis* and widows in Makthal. The federation plans to establish a place where these women can stay and learn vocational skills.

When asked how they would be able to achieve their goals, they said that they would do by working with men, linking with various stakeholders and requesting support from the APMSS. They are determined to work hard by strengthening collaboration among the federation members at the village, cluster and mandal levels and networking with various stakeholders.

8. Discussions and Conclusions

Empowerment is an important concept in the development process and the achievement of gender equality in society. Many on-going development projects incorporate components which aim to empower the weak and the marginalised, and approaches to empowerment of women tend to place an emphasis on economic aspects.

Under these circumstances, the Mahila Samakhya Programme adopts a problem-solving approach which focuses on social issues. It aims to empower women through education and create an environment in which women and girls avail themselves of educational opportunities. Since the programme started in Andhra Pradesh in 1993, women have organised themselves into *sanghams*, and *sanghams* have evolved into clusters, federations and *Maha Sanghams*. In the process, *sanghams* and *sangham* women have gained various aspects of power.

This working paper has examined the process of empowerment as groups and individuals, taking Makthal federation as a model case. It has found that the problem-solving approach is effective in empowering women's groups and individual members physically, psychologically, socially, economically and politically and that the positive effects of their activities are observed among their families, villagers and local government officials, as well as the staff of the APMSS. However successful the Mahila Samakhya Programme has proved to be, it cannot escape from challenges. This chapter will discuss these challenges and present some recommendations.

8.1. Difficulties in the management of the programme

The unique characteristics of the Mahila Samakhya Programme are the factors that contribute to its success in empowering women. The approach, which is process-oriented, participatory and bottom-up decision-making, can be considered ideal for advocates for development with people's participation. The problem-solving approach is appreciated by the women in the group discussions, too. They said that they liked this programme because they could work on various issues, while other programmes tend to focus on only one area of activities. The fieldwork found that the multiplicity and flexibility of the programme is attractive to *sangham* women.

Difficulties are, however, apparent in the management of the process-oriented programme. Without setting pre-determined quantitative targets with deadlines, there is a danger of the programme going nowhere. The APMSS implements the programme depending on the progress made by *sanghams*. For example, it decides an approximate number of training workshops to be conducted beforehand in the previous fiscal year, but it arranges dates, length, and contents of the training later according to the needs

identified by *sangham* women. Success of group formation depends on various factors, most of which contain uncertainties.

The staff of the APMSS use the term, strong or weak *sanghams*, when it refers to a particular *sangham*'s situation. When asked them what influences the development of *sanghams*, they presented the following factors.

Location of the village

When access to the village is difficult due to lack of public transport, the frequency of *karyakarthis*' visits is inclined to be low. It is not easy to maintain close communication between *sangham* women and *karyakarthis*, as well as between *sanghams* in neighbouring villages.

Composition of the sangham

Some *sanghams* consist of single castes, while others consist of multiple castes. In general, it takes less time for the former to be united than the latter, and the former are less likely to have conflicts among its members.³⁵

Capacity of karyakarthis

Karyakarthis are responsible for motivating women to form groups and providing support to them for their activities. Their roles are especially important in the initial stage. When their support is not sufficient, *sanghams* are unlikely to operate well.

Capacity of sangham women

When a *sangham* has a few active women who can take on leadership, group activities are likely to proceed faster. It also matters whether a *sangham* has educated members or not, since some activities require literacy skills. Without these members, progress depends on how quickly some women who can coordinate and lead other women emerge through trainings and activities.

Human relationships

When many women with different backgrounds gather, conflicts may arise in taking collective actions (see chapter 6.5). *Sangham* women and *karyakarthis* may not get along well together. The relationships among members and between members and *karyakarthis* affect the development of *sanghams*.

³⁵ However, once the group is united, multi-caste *sanghams* can have broader support than single-caste *sanghams*, since members belong to different social groups (interviewed, January 5, 2011).

All of these five factors except for factor (1) are uncertain, when *karyakarthas*, especially new ones, start visiting villages. Even with regard to factor (1), it is not possible to avoid remote villages, since these villages tend to be less developed.

The success of the Mahila Samakhya Programme in Andhra Pradesh appears to be attributed to maintaining the high level of programme management and the staff's commitment to the work. The problem-solving approach can be effective with strenuous interventions by capable staff. It is, therefore, not easy to replicate this approach, unless these conditions are met.

8.2. Dilemma between expansion and quality

Exactly as mentioned above, the APMSS is facing a dilemma between the quality of the programme versus the expansion of the coverage. The Mahila Samakhya Programme is now operated in fourteen out of twenty-three districts in the state which has the fourth largest area in India, yet with a limited number of staff. The programme has developed on the basis of close collaboration between *sangham* women and the staff of APMSS (in the state and the district offices and *karyakarthas*). As the programme area is expanding, the staff themselves feel that they are losing the sense of closeness to women in villages, and they are concerned about what the women of the federations think about them after they withdraw from their villages, since they do not meet them as often.

In the group discussion in Dandu village, a few women said that:

“The APMSS and *karyakarthas* used to come here very often. But, recently they have not come at all.” (Group discussion [b])

After the withdrawal of the APMSS, the frequency of the APMSS's visits to the villages of Makthal federation and training provided by the APMSS decreased. Thus, *sangham* members, who were neither representatives of *sanghams*, clusters nor the federation like the women above, had few opportunities to meet the APMSS's staff at mandal- or district-level meetings. They appeared to feel alienated from the Mahila Samakhya Programme and the APMSS.

In relation to this, the insufficient number of and high turnover of APMSS staff at the state and district levels compounds this situation. The major reason for this is pointed out as a heavy workload at low salary (Gulati, 2004; First Joint Review Mission, 2009). Often times, those who work in the APMSS for a few years and gain experience find better-paying jobs elsewhere.³⁶ It is ironic that the APMSS's good reputation of having well-trained staff increases their value in the job market.

³⁶ All the staff except for one whom I had met in the State Programme Office in 1999 were found to have left the APMSS during my visit in 2009. In 2011, I heard that the last person I had known had also gone because she had taken a job in another organisation.

Another reason for the high turnover concerns personal security. As the area covered by the programme is expanding, the staff and *karyakarthas* have to travel long distances, sometimes in difficult circumstances. They also face opposition and harassment when they fight against long-practicing customs (see chapter 7.1.1). Therefore, some staff are unwilling to extensively work in the field and others leave the APMSS out of worry about their security or due to opposition from their families (APMSS, 2009; First Joint Review Mission, 2009). It is important for the APMSS to find effective ways of implementing the programme at the level of quality that they have maintained with the limited number of the staff.

8.3. Slow progress in literacy education

Literacy education is supposed to be the most important component of the Mahila Samakhya Programme, but a marked achievement is not observed. The APMSS said that there were more educated women in the *sanghams* which were formed in recent years than the *sanghams* which had been formed in early years, reflecting the increase in the female literacy rate in Andhra Pradesh as a whole. The APMSS intends to have at least 50% of literate members in a *sangham* and 100% for the Federation Executive Committee members, but it does not have records on individual members' educational levels. The annual report for 2009/10 (APMSS, 2011) states that 16,380 members became literate in the year, but it not known how many remain illiterate.

It was little surprise, therefore, that after the group discussion ended in a village, the participating women, one after another, thumb stamped the notebook instead of signing to record their attendance. The APMSS staff explained that they preferred thumb stamping, though some of them were able to write at least their names, because it is easier for them to just stamp rather than use a pen that they were not accustomed to using. The women who I saw thumb stamping have been members of the *sangham* since 1994. It was pity that they have not benefitted from educational opportunities provided by the Mahila Samakhya Programme.

The slow progress in literacy education is mainly due to the lack of interest among *sangham* women, in particular older women, according to the APMSS's staff. In the group discussions, when asked about their interest in learning literacy skills, illiterate women gave the following negative responses.



A Woman Who Was Thumb-Stamping

“I have too much work to do. No time for going to an adult learning centre.”

“What do I do at this age? After I learn and become able to read and write, can I get a job like men?”

“There is no benefit for me, because I am doing agriculture.”

These women compare benefits of acquiring literacy skills with the time and effort spent on learning, and reach the conclusion that it is not worth it.

Only one woman said that the reason she had not participated in literacy classes was that there was no adult learning centre available in her village. It is, however, unknown whether she is really interested in learning or if it is just an excuse, since learning centres can be opened when *sangham* women want to study.

The official of the state government in charge of the Mahila Samakhya Programme certainly recognises the low female literacy rate as a big challenge. She said that she had instructed the APMSS to make further efforts to start or restart learning centres in its programme villages (interviewed, January 10, 2011). An irony of the Mahila Samakhya Programme’s strategy is that training is offered out of the interests of *sangham* women. Literacy education is not conducted, in principle, when there is no such demand.

Given the existence of many illiterate *sangham* women, it may be necessary for the programme to make the component of literacy education compulsory. Firstly, the APMSS can make a rule that every member of a *sangham* must be able to write at least her name and thumb stamping would not be accepted. A short session on literacy skills can be conducted at every meeting or training workshop, by which *sangham* women learn at least one or two words often used in their daily lives. This casual way of learning may be effective, unlike adult learning centres or literacy camps, where they have to sit and learn for certain hours. Moreover, joining these literacy classes is optional, but all members attend *sangham* meetings.

After I had made these suggestions to one of the APMSS staff during the fieldwork, she gave me some feedback later. She wrote that the APMSS had found literacy as a key factor to facilitating the process towards autonomy and sustainability of federations, and reviewed the on-going interventions in literacy education. The APMSS had strongly felt the need to reach a large number of illiterate members in a short period of time. The APMSS had already initiated a project, Literacy Sessions in Every Forum. Whenever *sangham* women gather, literacy education has been provided at the end of meetings. Some key words which are picked up from the meetings and discussions are taught to the participants. This short session has been used for motivating *sangham* women to join literacy projects, such as the Adult Learning Centre and Literacy Camp. It has been successful according to her.

It appears, however, that the short literacy session has not sufficiently motivated *sangham* women to learn, given the fact that a large number of *sangham* women are still

illiterate. In order to achieve 100% literacy among all *sangham* members, it is necessary for the APMSS to find a measure to provide literacy education to those who have no interest in participating in the on-going literacy projects.

8.4. Sustainability of the federations

The oldest federations, including Makthal federation, have now more than ten years of experience. Through trial and error in new endeavours in initial years, it has developed as an organisation with a solid structure, capacity to conduct activities, and particularly the member women who have committed themselves to the cause for women. The impacts of their activities have become visible in Makthal mandal.

However, the work for the federation is entire voluntary without a secure source of funding. In order to sustain the federation's activities, a couple of challenges have been identified. Firstly, Makthal federation has managed to raise funds through project contracts with the APMSS, local governments and NGOs in addition to contributions from members. The federation mostly works with the APMSS, from which it can obtain funds for activities in relation to the Mahila Samakhya Programme. When the federation wants to start its own projects apart from the Mahila Samakhya Programme in the future, it has to diversify and secure sources of funding in the long run.

Secondly, it is a challenge to maintain members' motivations and increase their capacity. It appears that there are two groups of women in Makthal federation. One is a core group of women who play leading roles in the management of the federation. They meet each other on a regular basis and also with the APMSS's staff and members of other federations and *sanghams*. Another group is *sangham* members who do not hold any posts in the federation or on the Issue Committees, which constitute the majority of the federation. In comparison with the core group of women, they basically conduct activities within their villages and have fewer opportunities to meet *sangham* members in other villages. Some of these women may not understand well about the new structure: Makthal federation has taken over the APMSS and continued activities under the Mahila Samakhya Programme. This was observed in the group discussion, as mentioned earlier.

Ideally, as the programme envisions, it is good for different women to take leadership. In reality, some women are active and vocal, while others are quiet, and the former tend to concentrate in leadership positions. A challenge is to keep the motivation of the members high by taking various actions and inspire many women who can become leaders. Here too, illiteracy can be a psychological barrier. Literacy education is one of the key factors for sustainability.

8.5. Concluding remarks

The process of women's empowerment is not uniform across societies, and the approach adopted varies depending on the socio-economic context in which women live. In the midst of the situation where the economic approach to women's empowerment attracts the most attention, this working paper has examined the problem-solving approach employed by the Mahila Samakhya Programme in India.

Taking Makthal federation as a model case, the fieldwork found that *sangham* women are empowered physically, psychologically, socially, economically and politically by learning and solving problems. They are gaining confidence and becoming able to make decisions sometimes against the decisions made by their families and others in their villages. They are entering the decision-making process in local governments and exerting influence on local policies to some extent, as the APMSS hopes that federations function as pressure groups which can push forward and fight for women's issues. They are also developing linkages with various stakeholders to facilitate societal changes.

There are challenges that the Mahila Samakhya Programme, the APMSS and Makthal federations have to overcome, but their achievements show the importance of explicitly incorporating components of satisfying strategic gender needs in projects for women. The Mahila Samakhya Programme places emphasis on political empowerment and increases women's representation in local governance. This is a step for women to participate in state- and national-level politics.

It must be noted, however, that this working paper does not underestimate the effectiveness of the economic empowerment approach, and acknowledges the limitations of this study. In order to further explore the process of women's empowerment, it is necessary to conduct in-depth fieldwork and collect both quantitative and qualitative data. At this stage, it is hoped that this working paper has shown that collective action is an effective strategy for marginalised women to improve their situation and the ways in which they are empowered through the problem-solving approach, and in turn, has provided some insight on planning projects for women.

Box 20. The Strength of *Sanghams*

The police question a *sangham* woman.

“With whose support have you taken on such a big case [rape]? On what power are you roaming around at ten o'clock in the night? I have the authority of my uniform and my government post to do what I am doing.”

She replied.

“Do you want to know what power I have? I have the power of 370 villages of *Auriya* (district). Do you want to know beyond that? I have the power of sixteen districts in [the state of] Uttar Pradesh. Do you want to know beyond that? I have the power of eight [now ten] states in India.”

Behind a *sangham*—a small group of women in a village, around 800 thousand women all over India are standing by.

Source: Excerpt of a story introduced by Purushothaman (2010: 1)

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