



**Attaining the MDGs in India**  
**The Role of Public Policy and Service Delivery**  
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## MAHILA SAMAKHYA

Mr. Amrit Singh, the National Project Director of the Mahila Samakhya, was in a pensive mood on a bright Sunday morning in January 2003. Though he was happy with the program's performance, a series of questions were simmering in his mind. It had been a long journey for the program to reach this level. However, when he looked into the future, he felt uncertain. The major concern related to the the federation's ability to sustain the objectives of the program. In the spirit of decentralisation and eventual withdrawal of the program from matured *sanghas*, a federal structure had been put in place through a consultative process.

He was also reminded of the fact that he had to prepare and submit a report on the program's performance to the Minister of Human Resources Development. Though he was confident of the program's success, he was not very sure how to measure the performance in objective terms. Furthermore, he was also expecting that the minister would ask his opinion on the replication potential of the program, and the possibility of scaling up the program in other states.

### **The Mahila Samakhya Program: Concept and Genesis**

The Government of India's Mahila Samakhya Program used education as a means of empowering women through women's collectives called *sanghas*. The formation of the *sanghas* and their activation was founded on the critical issues that affect the lives of women, rather than the assurance of material gains or benefits.

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There was a growing realisation that women's tendency to be involved only in the survival process, the absence of opportunities for them to share experiences, and the socially accepted stereotypes of women's roles were responsible for the belief that women did not need education. The result of a lack of education, poor access to information and lack of awareness of themselves or their surroundings was a low self-image, limited feelings of self-worth and a lack of self-confidence. There was a need, therefore, to address these disabling circumstances, in order to bring women out of this vicious cycle.

Taking its cue from the National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986, the Department of Education of the Government of India (GOI) designed the Mahila Samakhya Program (MS) as a concrete effort to achieve the empowerment of rural women through education, particularly women from socially and economically marginalised groups. Education, according to the policy, was a tool for empowerment and social justice. The link between education and women's empowerment was posited as being central to an equity-oriented education policy. The program focused on the empowerment of women as the critical precondition for their participation in the education process.

In formulating MS, it was noted that:

- educational processes in the country invariably excluded the socially and economically deprived, and that women and girls were most affected by this.
- the relevance of, and access to education could be changed only when the user group recognised it as socially meaningful and was convinced that it would enable them to acquire the information and skills necessary to transform their lives and social condition.

MS wanted women to become better at gaining consciousness and more able to critically engage with their environment. MS envisaged education as a means of enabling women to think critically, to analyse their condition, to acquire the information and skills necessary to make changes, and above all to determine their own roles and identities vis-à-vis their social surroundings. MS envisaged education as a way of providing women the means to move from passive acceptance to active self-determination. MS thus widened the definition of education to broadly mean anything that helped such a transformation to take place.

A team of consultants was engaged for the task of translating the commitments in the NPE into concrete plans. The challenge was to design a framework that would be supportive of women's empowerment and would also address the issue of women's unequal participation in education.

The process of project formulation that commenced in March 1988 thus evolved through a process of rigorous consultations and debates at different levels involving representatives from the government and non-governmental sectors. The original concepts and project framework underwent refinement and change as a result of the lessons arising from implementation. With each revision, the program appreciably widened in scope, as it tried to respond to the issues and needs that were voiced by the women's collectives.

## **Objectives**

As a women's empowerment project, Mahila Samakhya sought to bring about a change in women's perceptions of themselves, as well as those of society in regard to

women's traditional roles. The centrality of education in the struggle to achieve equality was an important focus of Mahila Samakhya. In pursuance of the project goals the objectives framed for MS sought to:

- i. Enhance the self-image and self-confidence of women, thereby enabling them to recognise their contribution to the economy as producers and workers, reinforcing their need for participating in educational programs.
- ii. Create an environment where women could seek knowledge and information to make informed choices and thereby empower them to play a positive role in their own development, and the development of the society, at their own pace.
- iii. 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 would provide the necessary conditions for effective participation.
- iv. Enable *mahila sanghas* to actively assist and monitor educational activities in the villages – including primary school, adult education, and non-formal education centres and facilities for continuing education.
- v. Provide women and adolescent girls with the necessary support structure, and an informal learning environment to create opportunities for education.
- vi. Set in motion circumstances for increased participation of women and girls in formal and non-formal education programs, and create an environment in which education could serve the objectives of women's equality.

This set of objectives evolved out of the draft drawn up in September 1988. The revised project document presented in September 1991 had the objectives reframed to further emphasise and strengthen the identity of Mahila Samakhya as an educational program by linking the emerging educational strategies within the program to already existing educational structures, and by creating new women-centred facilities. The "empowerment" component in the 1991 document was defined more concretely than before, in terms of enhancing the self-image and self-confidence of women and enabling them to recognise the worth of their contribution to society. In the "Green Book"<sup>1</sup>, the 1992 version of the project document, the objectives were further refined and integrated, and the emerging strength of the implementation mechanisms was acknowledged by building in a decentralised management structure as a program objective.

### **The Non-Negotiable Principles**

Mahila Samakhya clearly stated a set of non-negotiable principles and stipulated that these must provide the basic framework for implementation and monitoring. These non-negotiable principles<sup>2</sup> were developed to ensure that the basic spirit and ethos of the program was not subverted.

- i. All processes and activities within the program must be based on respect for women's existing knowledge, experience and skills.
- ii. 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.

<sup>1</sup> "Green Book" – the popularly used term for the project document which has been green in colour from the very beginning

<sup>2</sup> Mahila Samakhya (Education for Women's Equality) Ninth Plan Document 1997-2002, MHRD, Department of Education, Government of India 1997

- iii. Women and women's groups at the village level set the pace, priorities, form and content of all project activities.
- iv. Planning, decision-making and evaluation processes, as well as all levels of project personnel must always be accountable to the women's collectives at the village level.
- v. All project structures and personnel must play facilitative and supportive, rather than directive roles.
- vi. A participatory selection process followed to ensure that project functionaries at all levels were committed to working among poor women and were free from caste/community prejudices.
- vii. Management structures were to be decentralised, with participative decision-making and devolution of powers and responsibilities to District, Block and Village levels.

### **Program Management Structure**

There were very few precedents of project management structures to draw upon while designing the structures for Mahila Samakhyas. The proposed structures had to uphold the non-negotiable principles under varying circumstances. Though a government-driven initiative, past experience did suggest that government departments and the standard bureaucratic machinery were neither attuned to the vision articulated by MS nor equipped to affect the desired changes in perceptions and attitudes of, and towards women. A creative partnership, therefore, between the government and NGOs seemed to be the most appropriate mechanism to realise the MS aspirations.

A two-tier project management structure – at the national and state levels – was conceived. The National Project Office within the Department of Elementary Education and Literacy, GOI under the Ministry of Human Resources Development was the primary authority for program co-ordination and administration. The registered autonomous state societies, as the focal point for the project in the states, had their extended administrative arm in the form of the District Implementation Units (DIU). The sub-district structure had personnel at the block/*mandal* level, and a *sahayogini* for a cluster of ten villages. The program management structure of MS is shown in **Exhibit 1**. A *sahayogini* was a cluster-level functionary whose functional jurisdiction extended to a cluster of ten villages. She facilitated the activities of the *sangha* and was responsible for their growth and development.

A National Resource Group (NRG), which advised and guided the program, also provided a crucial interface for MS with the voluntary sector, the women's movement and research and training institutions. It played a significant role in debating directions for the program in matters such as the *sakhi* versus the *sangha* model, focus of collectives, decentralisation, autonomy of MS, etc. At its biannual meetings the NRG discussed conceptual issues and concerns that arose in the program; advised on how to evaluate the program, and also advised GOI on policy matters concerning women's education. At the NRG meetings management issues were taken up for decisions and then formulated as proposals for change in program framework/policy. Each NRG member, as a member of the EC of some MS program, was an influential nominee on the EC whose opinion could not be easily bypassed.

The National Project Office, led by a National Project Director, supported by a team of consultants and support staff, functioned as the project's nodal coordinating and

administrative body. It provided the secretariat for Mahila Samakhya; looked after finance, administration and monitoring of the program; coordinated with state programs for effective implementation; and helped integrate the MS approach with larger educational/women's development initiatives.

The program was implemented through an autonomous registered Mahila Samakhya Society in the states, which was headed by a full time State Program Director (SPD) who steered the program towards its objectives and ensured that all interventions/activities were in consonance with the values and spirit of the program. As the apex body in the state, the SPO received grants from the GOI. Besides providing administrative support, the SPO also provided resource and training inputs to the program and for that purpose drew upon a wide network of government and NGO contacts. Consultants and support staff assisted the State Project Office.

The General Council (GC) and the Executive Committee (EC) supported the state society. The GC was headed by the Education Minister of the concerned state (in the case of Andhra Pradesh, the Chief Minister) and was vested with powers to review the implementation of the program and give overall policy guidance. The EC was an empowered body that was responsible for all administrative and financial decisions including in-depth examination of specific innovations and programming in general. The State Education Secretary was the Chairperson of the EC. The SPD was the Member Secretary of the Executive Committee and had overall responsibility for financial management, administration, program planning and implementation. The members of the EC consisted of DPCs from all MS districts, two nominees from the Department of EE & L of the GOI and two from the State Department of Education, as well as from other departments of the state government and other bodies, along with two *sahayoginis* (by rotation). Both the GC and EC, had representatives from the GOI, state government and non-governmental sector, as members.

This structure at the state level developed from turbulent beginnings and the overall experience of project implementation. NGOs were used as launching pads for MS when the program was first taken to the field. The idea was basically to test the model and see how it could be made workable on the ground, in order to subsequently institute state societies for its implementation. When the rigour of the program gradually unfolded, the NGOs began feeling the pressure. Gradually MS also realised that the NGOs' philosophy and priorities did not always match those of MS. Women's equality and the struggle against gender subordination were not necessarily NGO priorities. They were mostly working on women's collectives for rural development. They were unable to comprehend the specific agenda of empowerment as defined in MS. The urgency of direct implementation by MS became evident.

Though set to take off on its own, MS was caught in a situation where NGO leaders expressed unwillingness to relinquish control and hand over the project to MS. In some places territorial rights were not easily transferred, and MS moved out of some of the blocks where the program was initiated by NGOs, for example in Tehri (UP). The NGOs were so much in control that they resisted transfer of control even to the *sanghas*. Issues of control, infrastructure, and personnel essentially led to the differences between MS and the NGOs.

The District Implementation Unit, which was a unit of the state society, administered and coordinated the project, and provided resources and training support at the district level. A District Program Co-ordinator (DPC) functioned as the head of the DIU and had a team of Resource Persons (RP) and support staff to assist her. This unit was directly in

touch with *sangha* through *sahayoginis*. It also networked with the local administration, other institutions and NGOs in the district.

The Ninth Plan version of the project guidelines introduced the concept of a block-level unit. It was envisaged that these units would be set up in areas where the *sangha* women were strong and experienced *sahayoginis* could render resource support to a network of *sangha*. This was seen as a step to bring the program closer to its long-term objectives of devolving decision-making and program initiatives to the *sangha* level and begin the process of eventual withdrawal. The sub-district structures located at the block/*mandal* and cluster level were clear program implementation structures rather than administrative structures and played a critical program implementation role. This structure was experimented with in some states and was formalised in the Tenth Plan.

The need for quality technical inputs on various program aspects increased with the program's expansion. Alongside this, program expansion also brought out the need for cross-district learning through sharing of experiences. To meet these resource needs, the program widened its network and accessed diverse sources of information and inputs. In order to sustain the program's momentum, and also infuse it with qualitative inputs, state and district resource groups were constituted.

### ***Sanghas***

The *sangha* was the women's collective at the village level and the primary "user group". The initiation of MS activities centred on formation of the *sanghas*, which were the hub of all discussions and debates that eventually determined the program's direction. Typically, a *sangha* consisted of a group of 15 to 20 women, sometimes reaching more than 200 women. Their activities included accessing basic civic amenities; learning to deal with health issues; ensuring learning opportunities for their children, especially girls; doggedly trying to become literate; breaking gender stereotypes in acquiring new skills like becoming mechanics; learning to manage credit; effectively participating in Panchayati Raj processes (local self-government); learning legal procedures and understanding how administrative and social structures work; gaining the strength to demand accountability and effective delivery of services; and confidently addressing issues of violence against women, child marriage and the *devadasi/jogini* system.

*Sanghas* provided the women with a space and environment where they could meet, be together, and begin the process of reflecting, asking questions, speaking fearlessly, thinking, analysing and above all feeling confident to articulate their needs through this collective. With its emphasis on processes rather than the mechanical fulfilment of set targets, the Mahila Samakhya Program had afforded an opportunity to many women and girls to take a closer look into their lives.

### **Decision-Making**

MS emphasised collective and participatory decision-making that involved functionaries and the *sangha* women alike. A conscious choice was made that no decision at any point would be thrust upon anyone. Even within the *sangha*, women had reported the existence of participative decision-making processes. All *sangha* women had an equal say in all matters and in case of conflict, the decision swung in favour of the majority opinion.

The Executive Committee (EC) was the formal decision-making body for MS state societies. The two *sahayoginis*, acting as the interface between the *sanghas* and EC, not only brought in the *sangha* perspectives, but also were active participants in the decision-making processes in MS. The decisions of the EC as an empowered committee regarding administrative and financial matters were final and taken to be the government's decision.

One of the ways the grassroots aspirations and visions reached the stage of formal decisions was by integrating them into the annual plans for ratification by the Executive Committee. The other was for issues originating at the *sanghas*, or other levels of the program, to travel upwards for placing before the EC. In this way, the EC, as the formal decision-making body, often reaffirmed and approved the demands emanating from the grassroots. Though EC was empowered to take decisions on its own, it followed a consultative process.

## Coverage

The Mahila Samakhya Program, launched in 1988-89, began in 10 districts of Gujarat, Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh. It was subsequently implemented in over 9,000 villages in 10 states across the country. The program was extended to Andhra Pradesh towards the end of 1992 and to Kerala in 1998. The details are given in **Exhibit 2**. The program's expansion had been made possible with funding support from basic educational projects such as the Bihar Education Project (BEP), Uttar Pradesh Basic Education Project (UP BEP) and the District Primary Education Program (DPEP).

The initial philosophy of coverage was to expand the program to states that were representative of regions in the country. Subsequent expansion was district-based, and different issues were taken into consideration by the states to determine their criteria for expansion. The expansion of MS in the Tenth Plan period proposed to extend it to the Educationally Backward Blocks (EBB) identified in the country. A different norm was proposed for Assam and Kerala where expansion was based on the education and social backwardness of districts.

## Program Implementation

### *Making Inroads*

After selecting the villages for coverage under MS, the first action point was to mobilise women to form the collectives or *sanghas*. The process typically commenced with informal interactions with the women about their status, violence inflicted upon women, their ill-treatment and malpractices related to treatment of widows and childless women. The program representatives (*sakhis/sahayoginis*) spent time with individual women in their homes, and initiated dialogue to gain their confidence. When a sizeable number of women evinced interest in what the MS functionary said and were willing to come together, discussions were held in public places. Gradually, as attendance increased, and more issues came up for discussion, the women were willing to talk about themselves. In some villages the *panchayat* members assisted in the mobilisation process.

This process was ridden with hurdles. The various methods employed to reach out to women often met with resentment from various quarters. Men were reluctant to let their

wives participate in village meetings and to travel out of the village for meetings and training. An air of suspicion prevailed about the underlying intentions of MS. Women came under social pressure and their personal inhibitions and anxieties hindered *sangha* formation. However, it was a matter of time and *sanghas* were formed despite the odds.

### ***Models of Sangha Formation***

#### *Sakhi Model*

The project had originally conceived of using one woman, the *sakhi*, to work on *sangha* formation. The *sakhi* was the village woman who was identified as the leader of the prospective *sanghas*, and was assigned the task of forming *sanghas* and operationalising them. In 1988-89, when MS was launched, it adopted this model, whereby a woman from the targeted village population played the lead role in *sangha* formation and was paid an honorarium for the work she did. She introduced the concept of MS in the villages, identified active women to form a *sangha*, raised issues and encouraged the *sangha* women to seek solutions at *sangha* meetings. She was supported by the *sahayogini*. This model did not work for long as group cohesion was affected. The *sakhi*, being a paid member of the group, was expected to shoulder all the responsibilities while the other women remained passive members of the *sangha*. In due course MS decided to withdraw the *sakhi*. But the process of withdrawal was not easy and MS was confronted with the issues of smooth withdrawal of the *sakhis*.

#### *Sangha Model*

The *sakhi* model gave way to the *sangha* model, which entailed the creation of the women's collective by the *sahayogini*. There were no stated or paid leaders in this model. The collective functioning of the *sanghas*, with motivation from the *sahayogini*, enabled the natural leader to emerge from within the group, and be selected by consensus. The *sahayogini* was paid an honorarium for her services. This proved to be a more stable model as there were no hierarchies, no disparities and the group did not have the option of depending on pre-selected leaders. The *sangha* model offered more transparency in functioning. In this model every group member was entitled to equal participation from the inception of the group to become/select the leader. The group had sufficient time to assess the emerging leadership before making someone the formal group leader.

#### *Self-Help Group Model*

MS in AP tried to build on the women's Self-Help Group (SHG) movement. MS used this network of already organised women to create *sanghas*. A SHG typically had around 15 members and five or six such SHGs were grouped to form a *sangha*, such that the membership of these *sanghas* ranged between 40 and 100 women. MS began by meeting all the groups and introducing the program. The mobilisation required was minimal, as a bonding already existed among the women on credit and thrift/micro-credit activities. There was a need for perspective building and forming the *sangha* in line with the spirit of MS. The expressed priorities in the beginning generally centred around the difficulties faced in relation to their thrift and credit activities e.g. banks, *gram sevikas* and the lenders who did not deposit the money collected by them, so on and so forth. After this initial phase they shifted to issues related to village facilities like roads, drinking water and ration cards. Then came education, women's health, child labour and other social issues like dowry, wife beating, alcoholism, and violence.

## Experience of *Sangha* Formation

MS encouraged issues to emanate from discussions in a collective mode and helped the women to concretise their views and ideas without influencing/biasing them. Inevitably social issues rooted in injustice, violence, disparities, denial etc. were uppermost on the list of priorities. This helped MS decide the educational inputs that were most appropriate for each group. The repeated episodes of confronting and resolving problems also added to the confidence levels of the *sangha* women.

The various issues that were encountered during the course of formation of the *sanghas* determined their rate of progress. In the beginning, the women did not see any need for literacy, as they were more concerned with issues of survival, such as drinking water, rations, minimum wages, violence etc. Once the *sanghas* started taking shape, there was a demand for information relating to these issues and the need for literacy began emerging.

Creating and sustaining the momentum of the *sangha* (post-formation) was the first priority in the earlier stages of implementation. The momentum was created through a very rigorous contact-based approach with high involvement of program functionaries almost on a day-to-day basis. The stages of *sangha* evolution and their details are shown in **Exhibit 3**.

## Stages in MS Implementation

MS has undergone four distinct stages that were marked by certain characteristic features. The comparative advantage or disadvantage of the project in a state was linked to the time when it was launched, because the point of entry coincided with a particular stage of the project. As a result, those launched during consolidation stage gained from a relatively mature program management system compared to those which came in earlier. **Exhibit 4** provides the details of the stage-wise features and links them to the launch of MS in the states.

In 1988-89, the MS project had been drafted and taken to the field for implementation, and it was in the experimental stage. MS had limited understanding of how the field would respond to the project design and how effectively the project could be implemented and translated into action in diverse conditions. Several issues came up at this stage, conflicting at times, leading to dilemmas that were difficult to resolve. This phase was marked by intensive consultations and discussions for conflict resolution.

The project then graduated to a stage of stabilisation. Once again, a couple of years were spent grappling with this more focussed version of the project, when discussions on streamlining the various administrative and management procedures and systems were at their peak. The stabilisation phase was marked by discussions about structuring the systems and processes of MS. In framing their norms and procedures states that joined MS in this phase gained from the experiences of the ongoing programs, which were already in the process of refining their procedures and processes.

Consolidation was achieved after around four years of stabilisation, when the project shifted attention to streamlining systems and mechanisms for facilitating the process of implementation. At this stage the program had gained visibility and had substantially widened its network of friends and allies. MS began pondering over the need for a workable strategy for withdrawal that would help realise true decentralisation by setting up autonomous structures of *sanghas*. A program was considered to have attained maturity when the federating process successfully led to the formation of autonomous structures.

## **Impacts of *Sanghas* on Women**

### ***Altered Roles and Attitudes***

In most cases, until MS was introduced in villages, women had not moved out of their homes to join a collective movement. They now departed from their traditional roles to occupy the driver's seat on several fronts related to their own lives as well as that of others around them. The repositories of information and knowledge that opened up for them enabled them to acquire a range of knowledge and skills. The confidence that MS inculcated in them brought out leadership skills, along with decision-making and problem solving abilities. MS enabled them to change many social practices rooted in caste and class barriers as well as anti-women traditions.

### ***Emergence of Leadership***

Increased involvement in group activities and the regularity of meetings and discussions created the conditions for leadership. The *sanghas* needed someone to steer discussions and group dynamics. This brought out leadership qualities in them.

*Sangha* women in AP were contracted as consultants in the SPO and DIU to facilitate program expansion and consolidation. Furthermore, they also served as trainers in various state government projects. This also became a source of income for them, part of which went to the *sangha* fund.

### ***Political Participation***

The thrust from MS motivated many *sangha* women to actively participate in political processes as their political understanding was sharpened and they began seeing this as a means of fighting for their rights. Despite a lack of the political background and finances required to win elections, some of them contested *panchayat* elections and became active players in local self-government. Their political performance was rooted in their track record. The other kind of participation in public bodies was the induction of *sangha* women into the Village Education Committees (VEC) and School Education Committees (SEC). Many of them were office bearers in the VECs/ SECs.

### ***As User Groups: Capacity to Influence***

*Sangha* women took the lead against any instance of injustice or discrimination that came to their notice, and also challenged social practices that were anti-women. They dealt with the law enforcement agencies. The "positive nuisance value" of *sanghas* was able to extract prompt responses from these agencies and local administration alike. As a group, they could influence the removal of several social ill practices, such as the negative attitude of society to widows and childless women, instances of violence, dowry, child marriages etc. The *sanghas* successfully managed to get *panchayat* funds for development interventions in the village, such as constructing bus stands, drains, roads etc.

Men were also brought into the MS fold, and gradually became aware and sensitive to the issues pursued by the *sanghas*. In recognition of the *sanghas*' capabilities, there were increasing instances when men sought their assistance in getting some work done or problems resolved. Men were also willing to take charge of needs within the family such as

cooking, looking after the children and running the house to free their wives to attend meetings and participate in *sangha* activities even if it meant going out of the village for a few days.

Their impact on neighbouring villages was overwhelming. Informal women's groups cropped up and began soliciting guidance and support from the *sanghas* to get them organised.

They ventured into income-generating activities and in several instances approached financial institutions such as the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) to access funds. Savings schemes became an inevitable part of all *sanghas*. They contributed towards *sangha* funds in the form of grain. This was sold in the market to generate cash. This money was used as seed money, and to raise loans from other sources as well. The *sangha* funds were loaned to members of the *sangha* as well as others, but interest rates were higher for the latter. These funds were also spent to meet expenses related to re-addressing of social issues and also for village development activities. Once *sanghas* reached a certain stage of evolution, they qualified for *sangha* funds from MS (Rs 6,000 annually for three years).

The *sanghas* also engaged in various kinds of economic activity like group farming, fruit and vegetable vending, cattle rearing, tent house businesses, manufacturing and marketing of homemade products like pickles, papad, hand bags etc. *Sangha* women were often trained in skills like masonry, hand pump repairs and screen-printing, which enabled them to achieve economic independence. Vocational training was imparted to help them in these areas.

Comprehensive program efforts were directed to enabling *sanghas* to reach a stage where they could become autonomous entities. The project structure envisaged a block unit to be set up in areas where *sanghas* were strong, and experienced *sahayoginis* could render resource support to a network of *sanghas*. This was planned to decentralise leading to eventual withdrawal.

### **Need for Structural Realignment**

The program in its original form was conceived to facilitate the development of the *sanghas*. But with implementation experience, it was realised that the project's association with the *sanghas* had to be discontinued at some point in time through a gradual process of withdrawal. This realisation was articulated in the guidelines for the Ninth Plan period.

This required the program to develop parameters for grading the *sanghas* to classify them according to their level of evolution. The debate on ensuring the autonomy of the *sanghas* was thus triggered off to culminate in a collective decision favouring the formation of federations.

*Sanghas* were graded in terms of their status, maturity and also their ability to thrive without program support – as emerging, weak, medium, and strong. Project states also evolved their own parameters for classifying the *sanghas*. This *sangha* grading system that evolved over the years promoted decentralisation by reducing project involvement in the functioning of the *sanghas*.

Strong *sanghas* were those that acquired a “social space” and status while weak *sanghas* were those with fragile bonding between *sangha* members and also limited effectiveness. *Sanghas* were graded as emergent during the first year of their existence. Medium *sanghas* were those that showed sporadic signs of unity and effectiveness and dependence on the program was substantive. The broad parameters used for grading *sanghas* are given in **Exhibit 5**. By the end of the Eighth Plan period *sanghas* in many states showed signs of maturity in terms of enhanced capabilities and consistency in focus of intent.

Once *sanghas* were graded, MS determined its approach to improving their status and eventually moving them into the strong *sangha* category. The strategies to improve *sanghas* typically included strengthening links with other *sanghas* and encouraging inter-*sangha* interactions, forging links between *sanghas* and the village community, encouraging *sanghas* to take responsibilities and undertake campaigns and awareness programs, for which special *sangha*-level training was designed.

### **Withdrawal Strategy**

MS planned its gradual exit from the existing project areas to facilitate the mature *sanghas* to manage on their own with minimal support from the program. The first time withdrawal was attempted was in the Sewapuri block of Varanasi in UP. This led to a surprise for Sewapuri *sangha* and its *sahayogini*, but what seemed initially like a crisis of dislocation ended with some of the *sahayoginis* joining and setting up their own NGO Grameen Mahila Rachnatmak Samiti (Gramras) supported by MS while the other lot found alternative engagement in MS in different capacities or areas. The positive stance of the management here was able to handle human issues with sensitivity while partially retaining the program interest.

While the individual interests were well taken care of, the collectives did suffer a setback as the *sanghas* began drifting apart for want of a binding factor. The Sewapuri experience was jerky and the MS realised that it needed better planning and process initiatives, where *sanghas* were made a partner in the withdrawal process, before phasing them out. MS also had to find ways of operationalising this and ensuring an independent future for the *sanghas*.

MS planned the creation of “federations” as a part of phase-out plan based on the *sanghas*’ maturity. Federations were planned to bind the *sanghas* together, monitor their performance, help in strengthening the weak ones to become mature and be eligible to be a part of the federation. The federation structure was proposed to ensure that the movement, which began with MS intervention, did not die out with time.

After a lot of worry within the MS, the broad understanding about the future of MS assumed a framework, which is shown in **Exhibit 6**. This framework was a part of a larger effort at decentralisation.

While local-level discussions around these issues intensified, the National Project Office was consolidating views. In Sanghamitra, a national level workshop held in New Delhi, attended by around 1,400 women from eight states, a future course of action emerged. The workshop discussed experiences and achievements, modalities of federating, and related issues.

This gathering communicated to the *sanghas* that the future of MS was in federating *sanghas* as autonomous entities. Discussions that followed in the states focused on strategies

and structures for decentralisation, the financial implications of federating, norms and rules that would govern the functioning of the federations, accelerating the pace of activating *sanghas* towards formation of federations. In this context, apart from the regular inputs from MS, resource centres were conceived of, as units of expertise and appropriate technical know-how to support the *sanghas* and federations.

The latter part of the Ninth Plan period saw the program functionaries engage in debates on forming federations and also trying out different approaches in the field to federate the *sanghas*. Program functionaries from different levels came together (again as a part of a national effort) to delve into the possible ways to achieve this. Two clear requirements emerged – one was to find ways of supporting the federations and *sanghas* to sustain their autonomy and the other was to define a role for MS vis-à-vis the federations and program expansion.

The long-term goals, as included in the project objectives, articulated the devolution of decision-making and program initiatives to the *sangha* level, with a capacity for autonomous functioning. The plan for autonomy was linked to the formation of federations at the block level. Direct financial inputs of the program were to gradually end once the federations became viable and strong. The program planned to continue to provide resource support as and when demanded.

### **MS Vision for the Tenth Plan – Preparing for the New Role**

During the Tenth Plan period, structural changes were proposed in the existing districts and in districts where MS had been implemented for more than three years, as well as in new districts/states.

In the existing program areas, federations were emerging at clusters of approximately 50 villages that roughly corresponded to the MS coverage at *taluk/block/mandal* level. It was expected that these federations would gradually take over MS roles at block level through lateral expansion. In most areas where the program in the field was over three years old, the requirement was felt for higher levels of expertise and focus to strengthen the decentralisation process. To cater to this new program need, resource centres were proposed at the state, district and block levels. These centres were to operate as technical units to support the sustenance of the upcoming autonomous structures created by MS.

It was proposed that for every cluster of 50 villages the MS team would, after three years, consist of one Junior Resource Person (JRP) and two Cluster Resource Persons (CRPs). The *sahayoginis* could be upgraded to CRPs while other *sahayoginis* could be moved to new project areas, and could help with federation accounts and administration, *Nari Adalats*, *Mahila/Kishori Shikshana Kendras* etc. Districts were expected to cover 250 villages in three years through direct intervention. Clusters were to cover 50 villages. After five years, support to the federations was expected to come directly from district and state level resource centres. Programs launching in new districts could start with ten *sahayoginis* in 100 villages supported by a team of DPC and others. The emerging project management structures envisaged in this context are shown in **Exhibit 7**.

## **Federations: Towards Autonomy**

*The rationale:* The federations were envisaged with the objective of acting as a common forum for raising and resolving social issues related to women, acting as an intermediary between the *sanghas* and the administration, disseminating relevant information, networking with *panchayats* and government departments to ensure their cooperation, providing inputs to *sanghas* on health, education, governance and legal issues, providing opportunities for income generation to *sanghas* and keeping *sanghas* alive and bonded with one another.

*Process:* States were in different stages of forming federations. There was evidence to suggest that processes that went into their formation were intensive but varied across states. After the concept of federating was fleshed out in the program, steps were taken to build conceptual clarity among the concerned *sangha* women. The next step was to engage these women in discussions on the modalities of federating and even forming the cluster level *sanghas* (the conglomerate of representatives of village level *sanghas* in the decentralised structure) as a build-up to the federation. The first issue for the *sanghas* to resolve was the pattern of representation they would desire at the cluster level *sangha*. While the general consensus was to send representatives from each *sangha* to the cluster level structure, the number of representatives per *sangha* varied.

The cluster level *sangha* meetings were held regularly. This was the forum for discussing the other relevant details pertaining to formation of the federation at the block. In AP this process for firming up the details to set up the federation took about a year. When this process was initiated, the time taken to arrive at conclusions/decisions took longer than it did later. The process was a combination of meetings that threw up training and information needs and other inputs that MS had to organise.

*Structure:* This process culminated in finalised MOA and byelaws for the registration of the block/*mandal* level federation. The federations at the next level (*taluka/block/mandal*) either functioned as registered societies or as unregistered bodies. The registered federations had a governing council and executive committee. Women from the cluster level *sanghas* were members of these bodies through a process of selection or election. The structural patterns in place either had every *sangha* represented in the Governing Council or only some of them. This diversity was seen even within a state, as in AP.

The program managers in states like UP were still not sure that registering the federations as NGOs was the best option. It was felt that hierarchies would be reinforced and conflicts might arise over sharing the gains from economic ventures. In UP, the federations contained the membership of each *sangha* in their General Body. There were around 40-50 *sanghas* in one federation and two members from each *sangha* represented their *sangha*. The Executive Committee had around 20 members, who were elected from amongst the General Body members. In line with the MS strategy, the EC of the federation also had issue-based core committees on health, education, Panchayati Raj Institutions (local self-governance bodies) etc. Cluster-level meetings of the eight to ten *sanghas* in the federation were held on a monthly basis.

In AP, the *sanghas* were federated at the level of the *mandal*, which were smaller in size than the blocks. Also, the federations were structurally different from district to district. The main difference was in the number of cluster level *sangha* members going up to the General Body and EC of the *mandal* federation. The cluster-level governing bodies were

made up of five to seven *sanghas* with five or six members from each *sangha*. The general body of the *mandal* federation had around 15 members, three from each cluster. The Executive Committee had seven members who were selected by consensus from the cluster *sanghas*. Consequently, all villages/*sanghas* were not represented on the Governing Body or EC in AP. Federations ran Mahila Shikshan Kendra with project funding. *Nari Adalats* were also run by the federations.

The *sangha* women in Varanasi, UP believed that federation structure would open up opportunities for economic activities. In UP, *sanghas* stepped up their income-generating activities using their skills at making papad, pickles, etc., and looked up to the federations as a potential agent that would help them to market their products. Somehow, the geographic location of the federations seemed to underlie this belief. Federation meetings were considered important and the *sangha* women in UP contributed money for their two representatives to travel each time.

*Logistics:* Several associated logistical issues also had to be sorted out for the smooth conclusion of the process. For instance, the venue for the cluster meetings had to be negotiated with the Mandal Revenue Officer who agreed to provide the space. For attending these meetings the *sanghas* had either created separate funds or drew upon their existing funds. As there was no office for the federation, in some cases, land was acquired from the government to construct an office using funds for *mahila kutir*. Federation funds were built up with contributions from the *sanghas*. Monthly contributions from each *sangha* were made. It was difficult to say, how long this enthusiasm would last and whether women would tire of making contributions with no financial gains.

## **The Dilemma**

Mr. Singh was aware that the federations were formed with great enthusiasm and hope, and it had been two years since they were registered. He was sure that their effectiveness as an agent of social change remained intact but very little had happened on the economic front. A gradual sense of frustration seemed to be creeping in. It was felt that a continuity of issues to keep them engaged was of utmost importance. The timing and frequency of issues that emerged was not predictable. Further, beyond a certain point in time, social and other issues that called for the intervention of the federation or *sanghas* were not enough to keep them going. They needed a more regular flow of ‘things to do’ to sustain a sense of purpose. For example the members of the Sewapuri federation were very clear that monthly meetings were not necessary as there were not enough issues to be taken up. Efforts to get projects for the federations did not really yield results.

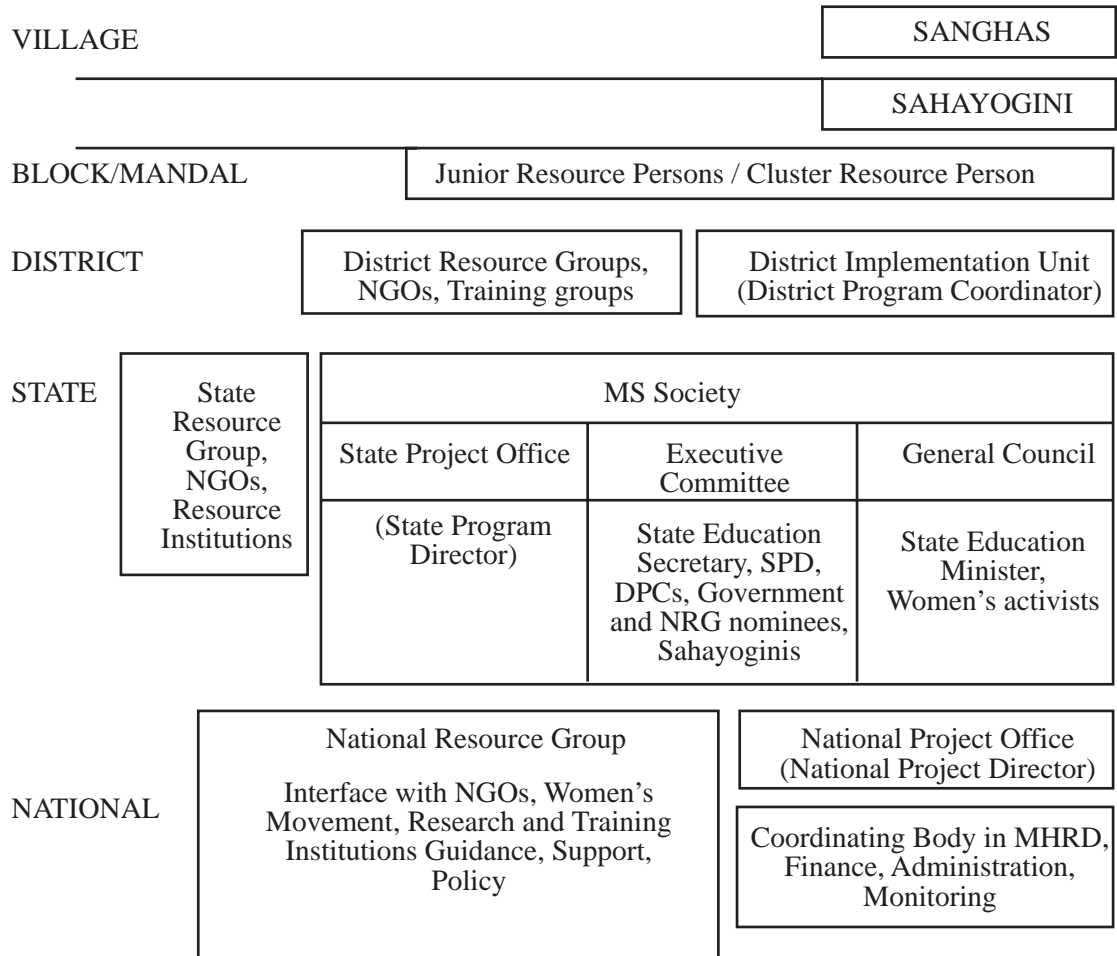
**Acronyms**

AE	Adult Education
AP	Andhra Pradesh [a state in India]
BEP	Bihar Education Project
DIU	District Implementation Unit
DPC	District Program Co-ordinator
DPEP	District Primary Education Program
DRDA	District Rural Development Agency
EBB	Educationally Backward Blocks
EC	Executive Committee
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
EE& L	Elementary Education and Literacy
GOI	Government of India
MS	Mahila Samakhya
MSK	Mahila Shikshan Kendra
NABARD	National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development
NFE	Non-Formal Education
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NPE	National Policy on Education
NPO	National Project Office
NRG	National Resource Group
POA	Program of Action
PRI	Panchayati Raj Institutions
RP	Resource Persons
SEC	School Education Committee
SHG	Self-Help Group
SPD	State Program Director
SPO	State Project Office
UP	Uttar Pradesh [a state in India]
UPBEP	Uttar Pradesh Basic Education Project
VEC	Village Education Committee □

Exhibit 1

MAHILA SAMAKHYA

**Program Management Structure**



## Exhibit 2

## MAHILA SAMAKHYA

**Geographic Coverage and Outreach 2001–2002**

		Andhra Pradesh	Assam	Bihar	Gujarat**	Jharkhand	Karnataka	Kerala	Madhya Pradesh	Uttaranchal	Uttar Pradesh	Total
1	District	7	5	7	7	4	7	2	2	3	12	56
2	Block	-			36					9	20	65
3	Mandal	31		-						-	-	31
4	Village	873*	665	1,994	1,436	1,893	1,200	129	180	540	1,022	9,059
5	Women Benefited (million)	.20	.06	.56	.25	.04	.25	.05	.03	.30	.05	1.79

Source: NPO March 2003.

\*This figure does not include villages in the two districts of Nalgonda and Warangal.

\*\* Figures for 2000-01.

Exhibit 3

MAHILA SAMAKHYA

**Sanghas: Stages of Evolution**

<b>STAGES OF EVOLUTION</b>			
<b>Feature</b>	<b>From Initiation to Formed <i>Sangha</i></b>	<b>From Formed to Active <i>Sangha</i></b>	<b>From Active to Independent <i>Sangha</i></b>
<b>Objective</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Formation of <i>Sangha</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Activation of <i>Sangha</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Autonomy of the <i>Sangha</i>/Enabling the <i>sangha</i> to survive on its own</li> </ul>
<b>Inputs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identification of potential group leaders</li> <li>- Training of <i>Sahayoginis/ Sakhis</i> and <i>sangha</i> women</li> <li>- <i>Sahayogini</i> provides guidance and helps in problem resolution</li> <li>- Discussions on social issues and dynamics in the local context</li> <li>- Program assistance in solving individual and social issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Awareness generation camps</li> <li>- Spread of literacy by establishing Mahila Shikshan Kendras, Kishori Kendras and Bal Kendras</li> <li>- Training in health, education, gender, para-legal and traditional healing methods to program functionaries and <i>sangha</i> women</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Specialised vocational training imparted to <i>sangha</i> women</li> <li>- Emphasis laid on economic activities by guiding the women to start their own income generating activities</li> <li>- Seed capital given to strong <i>sanghas</i> at Rs 6,000/- for 3 years</li> </ul>
<b>Processes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Functionaries' visits to women's homes</li> <li>- The facilitator/<i>sahayogini</i> introduce the MS program to village women</li> <li>- Community meetings held to discuss MS with the villagers</li> <li>- A regular pattern of visits set</li> <li>- Village women guided on identifying issues and prioritizing them</li> <li>- Demands on the <i>sahayoginis'</i> time and inputs very high at this stage</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Sangha</i> dealing with broader social issues</li> <li>- Increased interactions with Block Development Officers and other such officials</li> <li>- Inter-<i>Sangha</i> exchanges and co-operation in solving social issues and perspective building</li> <li>- Formation of issue-based core committees in <i>sanghas</i> to help women specialise in different fields</li> <li>- Internal dynamics and conflicts within the <i>sangha</i> become evident and some women drop out. A selected group of dedicated and focused women remains</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Sanghas</i> initiate their own economic activities and tackle social issues</li> <li>- Guidance sought from MS much more specialised and less frequent</li> <li>- Ability to initiate action and take on new challenges developed amongst all <i>Sangha</i> women not just the leaders</li> </ul>

Exhibit 3 (continued)

<b>From</b>	<b>From Initiation to Formed <i>Sangha</i></b>	<b>Formed to Active <i>Sangha</i></b>	<b>From Active to Independent <i>Sangha</i></b>
<p><b>Outcomes</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- MS initiated a thought process amongst village women, who now began to question traditional social practices and attitudes</li> <li>- There was a sense of bonding between women who took interest in the <i>sangha</i> activities based on social issues</li> <li>- Instances of addressing individual village level issues could be seen</li> <li>- Ability to prioritise issues and needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The <i>sangha</i> women were now confident, informed, skilled and gained much greater mobility</li> <li>- Emergence of effective and strong leadership from within the <i>sangha</i></li> <li>- <i>Sangha</i> women opened bank accounts with their savings</li> <li>- <i>Sangha</i> women were by this stage involved in the PRI proceedings and some women contested <i>Panchayat</i> Elections</li> <li>- Greater visibility of MS</li> <li>- The <i>sanghas</i> were actively involved in the social issues of their own village and other villages and were able to influence these</li> <li>- Acceptance of the credibility of MS women by the local authorities and the men and other villagers across class and caste groups</li> <li>- There were signs of other village women being set on the path to attitude change and empowerment.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The <i>sanghas</i> were now functioning capably as independent entities</li> <li>- <i>Sanghas</i> could manage their funds profitably</li> <li>- Some <i>sanghas</i> got themselves registered as Societies</li> <li>- Effective spread of empowerment to other women in the community as well</li> </ul>	

## Exhibit 4

## MAHILA SAMAKHYA

**Features of the Different Stages of MS Implementation**

Stage of Project	Features of the Stage	States where Project was Launched
Exploring and Experimenting 1988 – 1993	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Experimental launch with NGOs</li> <li>Eligibility and selection of critical program functionaries –<i>sakhi, sahayogini</i></li> <li>– Emphasis on training and external resources</li> <li>– Defining education based on the needs expressed by the grassroots women</li> <li>– Coordination with and support for the NGOs managing implementation</li> </ul>	Gujarat, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh (and, subsequent to bifurcation, Uttaranchal)
Stabilisation 1993 – 1997	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Greater clarity in implementation aspects</li> <li>– Streamlining the roles and responsibilities of program functionaries</li> <li>– Decentralisation of program implementation structures</li> <li>– Decision to withdraw <i>sakhis</i></li> <li>– Introduction of the <i>sangha</i> model for group formation</li> <li>– Realisation of the inadequacies of the administrative systems</li> <li>– Building of in-house training resources</li> <li>– Inter-<i>sangha</i> cooperation and exchange</li> <li>– Development of <i>Sangha</i> grading criteria</li> </ul>	Andhra Pradesh, Bihar (and, subsequent to bifurcation, Jharkhand)
Consolidation 1997/98–2000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Firming up of rules, regulations and procedures</li> <li>– Introduction of the concept of federations</li> <li>– Introduction of the SHG model of <i>sangha</i> formation (AP)</li> <li>– Strengthened network with other institutions and agencies</li> <li>– Formation of federations</li> <li>– Economic autonomy of <i>sanghas</i></li> </ul>	Assam, Madhya Pradesh
Maturity 2001–02	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Number of functioning federations increased</li> <li>– Policy level discussions on upscaling and expansion</li> </ul>	Kerala

## Exhibit 5

## MAHILA SAMAKHYA

**Attributes for Grading Sanghas**

<b>GRADE</b>	<b>ATTRIBUTES</b>
STRONG	Independent, high commitment levels, self reliant, clear perspective, ownership of activities/processes, strong collective and participative action, decisions by majority, active leadership, equality within group, access to information, ability to prioritise issues, identity as a group, ability to take initiative, continuous processes of addressing issues, strong bonds, efforts at addressing economic issues/economic autonomy
MEDIUM	Coming together on specific issues, intermittent signs of unity that was not sustained for long periods, persistence of class-caste division, members succumb to family and other social pressures, <i>sahayogini</i> leads initiatives, perspective on economic autonomy developing, relationships not consistent among members, leadership not clear, dependence on <i>sahayogini</i> , signs of self-interest evident, access to information limited
WEAK	Directionless discussions, indecisiveness, lack of effective action, signs of growth and progress not apparent, sense of stagnation, high dependence on <i>sahayogini</i> , <i>sangha</i> divided by strong caste - class factors, attendance at meetings not spontaneous, no collective processes, self interest dictates involvement, complete lack of ability to take initiative.

## Exhibit 6

## MAHILA SAMAKHYA

## FRAMEWORK FOR MS IN THE TENTH PLAN PERIOD

<p>Need for MS to withdraw active involvement in areas with strong <i>sanghas</i> in order to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Bring about decentralisation</li> <li>- Facilitate program expansion</li> </ul>
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EVOLVE PARAMETERS FOR GRADING SANGHAS TO  
PREPARE FOR DECENTRALISATION

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<p><b>Process of federating <i>sanghas</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Firm up structure of federation</li> <li>• Formulation of rules, norms</li> <li>• Formation of federated structures</li> <li>• Initiate processes within federations</li> <li>• Registration of federations</li> </ul>
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<p><b>New role for MS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitate process of federating</li> <li>• Continue inputs to <i>sanghas</i> to make them eligible for federating</li> <li>• Expansion into new areas</li> </ul>
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Exhibit 7

MAHILA SAMAKHYA

**Project Structure**

PROPOSED RESOURCE CENTRES	AUTONOMOUS STRUCTURES (CREATED BY MS)	PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION STRUCTURES		
<p>State Resource Centre</p> <p>District Resource Centre</p> <p>Block Resource Centre</p> <p>Technical structure to support the autonomous structures in attaining full autonomy in functioning</p>		NATIONAL	National Resource Group Office	National
		STATE	State Resource Centre EC GC	SPO
		DISTRICT	District Resource Group	DIU
	<p>Federations</p> <p>Cluster <i>Sangha</i></p> <p>Strong <i>Sangha</i> (registered/unregistered)</p>	BLOCK/MANDAL	Junior Resource Person/Cluster	Resource Person
		CLUSTER	<i>Sahayogini</i>	
		SANGHA	<i>Sangha</i>	

The autonomous bodies tackle social issues and engage in income generating activities

The existing line of management was envisaged to cater to:

- the ongoing activities in project areas where full autonomy was yet to be achieved
- new project areas to facilitate the creation of autonomous structures