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## **The political economy of women's empowerment policies in India**

Understanding it through the beginning and end of the Mahila  
Samakhya programme

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**Abstract:** This paper analyses the political economy of women’s-empowerment-related policy-making in India through a re-examination of the context of both the genesis and closure of a major programme, Mahila Samakhya. Mahila Samakhya, which embodied feminist philosophy and pedagogy, started in 1987 with the aim of creating the education-based empowerment of Dalit and Adivasi women in rural India, and was inexplicably shut down in 2014. We argue that a combination of political philosophy, electoral majority, and contemporary global trends influenced both the beginning and the demise of the programme. We argue that programmes such as Mahila Samakhya, which called for a long and messy process of collectivization of the most marginalized women using the methodology of reflection and reconstruction, became much less desirable with global shifts in development discourse. These shifts towards more ‘evidence’-based policy focused much more on immediate ‘outcomes’ than on ‘processes’, much to the detriment of programmes such as Mahila Samakhya.

**Key words:** women’s empowerment, processes, feminist, collectivization, historical analysis, political economy

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## 1 Introduction

Mahila Samakhya (MS) was originally started as a policy response in 1987 to facilitate the education-based empowerment of Dalit and Adivasi women—often the poorest and most marginalized sections of the female population in rural India. MS was the first of its kind in four distinct ways: (i) it embodied feminist philosophy and pedagogy; (ii) it targeted last-mile connectivity first—Dalit and Adivasi women in rural areas; (iii) it focused on processes rather than on outcomes—the programme had no fixed targets and no fixed time period; and (iv) it allowed participants the freedom to choose the pace and focus areas within a framework of non-negotiables and stated objectives.

Although started initially at a smaller scale in ten districts in three Indian states, MS was eventually extended to 126 districts in 11 states by 2014, covering about 42,000 villages (Jandhyala 2012; Jha and Menon 2016; MHRD n.d.; Sharma 2011)—a large scale indeed by any standard. The model of expansion was such that while it expanded to new areas, it also folded up in areas where it had already functioned for substantial number of years and enabled the process of long-standing and mature collectives creating representatively elected federations which would continue the work of MS in its absence. These Women's Federations, emerging after years of MS processes, were expected to function independently as an institution for their own empowerment and sustenance.

However, MS was suddenly closed by the Government of India in March of 2016 without any prior notice. This was despite the existence of ample evidence about the effectiveness of the programme in terms of (i) giving voice to Dalit/Adivasi women in political and electoral processes (Batliwala 1993); (ii) giving voice against family- or caste-based violence (Bhatla and Rajan 2003; Rajan 2012); (iii) enhanced mobility for Dalit/Adivasi women; (iv) pushing up the age of marriage and average years of education for girls (Jandhyala 2003; Bhuwania et al. 2016); and (v) economic empowerment through the development of small enterprises, demand for minimum wages, etc. (Menon and Parathasarathy 2012; Jha et al. 2019). This makes MS an important programme to be analysed in terms of understanding the political economic factors that led to its genesis, conceptualization, adoption, and implementation (especially the methodology that allowed Dalit and Adivasi women to set their own agenda) and its arbitrary and sudden demise.

Traditionally, public policies directed towards Dalit and Adivasi women have been outcome-focused, using targets as a measure of empowerment. Moreover, policies have also often treated women as a singular category, without acknowledging or examining the role of caste, social location, or regional differences. While Dalits as a social group face untouchability and segregation in almost all spheres of life and livelihood, Dalit women especially face the brunt of caste- and gender-related discrimination and inequalities in addition to issues related to poverty. The importance of studying the MS methodology lies in its recognition of this intersectionality and the critical role that processes such as collectivization can play in providing space for women to exercise their own agency and set their own agendas. Most other policies that have attempted to do this—to shift social norms or to provide women with the space to have a voice—have done it through very instrumental means. These include cash transfers, microfinance schemes, or livelihoods schemes with predetermined outcomes.

Although we have had a fair understanding of the genesis and implementation of the programme (Ramachandran 2006), as well as factors that have led to positive social outcomes, a comprehensive understanding of the entire lifecycle of the programme from the perspective of policy-making and its political economy has been missing. Our paper, to some extent, fills that gap. The paper argues that the political economy indeed plays a role in policy choices, especially in an area such as

women's empowerment. Feminist approaches and tools such as collectivization are increasingly being appropriated as an instrument to individualize and promote competition among women rather than as a process of emancipation leading to collective identity and action. The paper argues that a combination of political philosophy, electoral majority, and contemporary global trends influenced both the beginning and the demise of MS. Programmes like MS, which called for a long and messy process of collectivization of the most marginalized women belonging to Dalit and Adivasi groups using the methodology of reflection and reconstruction, became much less desirable with the emergence of global influences and moves towards 'evidence'-based policy-making that focuses much more on 'outcomes' than on 'processes'.

This paper is based on a re-examination of our own research materials in the form of interviews, focus group discussions, field notes, and observations collected for a detailed mixed-method, cross-sectional evaluation of the programme from 2015 to 2018 in one Indian state, Bihar (Jha et al. 2019), and for a one-time descriptive evaluation of a district in another Indian state, Karnataka (CBPS 2018). We did these studies at a time when the programme's continuation was uncertain, allowing us to explore the structures and processes when closure was almost imminent. For this paper, we also conducted a detailed literature review to understand the larger landscape of changes that have happened during this time, in addition to re-examining earlier data from the perspective of understanding the political/economic policy- and decision-making process. We also used working papers based on reflective pieces on MS that we had commissioned during our study from three individuals deeply connected with the conceptualization and implementation of the programme.

## **2 The genesis and growth of Mahila Samakhya**

The MS programme was conceptualized against a background of tremendous changes in women's movements and policies that engaged with women's empowerment. The post-colonial era in India saw the disintegration of the women's movement into smaller movements focused on local issues, which highlighted the problems faced by the most marginalized sections of society in different Indian states. The larger social movements demanding equality and rights, such as the Tebhaga and Naxalbari movements in Bengal and the Telangana movement in Andhra Pradesh, witnessed the participation of women in increasing numbers. For example, the anti-alcohol agitation in Andhra Pradesh was primarily led by women as a protest against violence perpetrated against them by alcoholic husbands (Kumar 1993).

In response to these localized movements, as well as the UN declaration of 1975–85 as the Decade of Women, policy-makers started to shift their attention to the status of women in India. With the publication of the *Towards Equality* report by the Committee on the Status of Women in India in 1974, it was firmly established that the freedoms envisaged in the constitution did not translate into realities for the women of India. The report galvanized a number of women-led groups, such as the Progressive Organisation of Women in Hyderabad, the Forum against Rape in Bombay, and Stree Sangharsh in Delhi, which directed their action towards pertinent issues such as sexual oppression of women, rape, domestic violence, and dowry killings. The public outrage and increasing pressure on the state mounted by the women's movement gave rise to the passing of several laws that recognized and punished custodial rape, death due to pressures of dowry, and physical and mental cruelty towards women by family members. Even if fragmented, these feminist groups continued to demand attention towards the structural inequalities that plagued the lives of women in India.

The voices that were being heard, however, were still those of upper-caste and upper-class women, who were widely criticized for claiming to represent the interests of Dalit, Adivasi Dalit, religious minority (Christian/Muslim), and queer women and co-opting the movement. The feminist movements and the development model of the state were criticized for being complicit in uploading power structures that led to the structural inequalities that define many women's existence in India (Chakravarti 2008). There emerged a strong need to understand the issues particularly plaguing women who belonged to the most marginalized sections of society—concerns such as hunger, safe drinking water, sanitation, education, healthcare, and employment. All of this was intrinsically connected with the historical location of caste<sup>1</sup> within Indian society.

Based on narratives of the 'ethnicization' of caste (Barnett 1975), starting in the early 1950s with the enshrinement of Dalit rights in the Indian constitution, caste groups began to mobilize themselves into being key actors in the political economy of social movements and to act as pressure groups within the political system (Bayly 2001). With time, caste, in some form, started to become an 'ethnic' identity, partly to reclaim and restore the dignity of caste identities (Reddy 2005). Moving to the term 'Dalit' from 'downtrodden', for example, calls for a specific acknowledgement of the historicity of the social suffering and oppression that these groups have experienced at the hands of those in power.

It is not the case that the links between caste and deprivation or exclusion had remained unacknowledged in policy responses. Affirmative action-based policies of reserving seats equivalent to their population percentage in educational institutions and public sector jobs pre-date independence, and the list was expanded to cover more groups post-independence, largely as a result of political mobilization by the caste-based groups claiming historical deprivation in relation to education and formal employment. Starting in the 1970s, caste also became an important identifier for the targeting of poverty reduction programmes. However, in all of this, caste, as evidenced by its inclusion in the official state-determined categories of SCs, Scheduled Tribes,<sup>2</sup> and Other Backward Classes/Castes,<sup>3</sup> remains merely an identifier for the 'beneficiaries' of 'benevolent' policies meant to 'uplift' them from their historically deprived positions.

'Girls and women' entered this arena as an additional marker for inclusion in certain schemes as a 'more marginalized' category within caste groups. However, none of these 'concessions' considered the everyday experiences of being a woman *and* a Dalit or Adivasi. It is here that programmes like MS were different. The programme was designed in such a manner that it did not expect Dalit or Adivasi women to be merely recipients, but positioned them as real actors and

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<sup>1</sup> Simply defined, caste is a hierarchical social status ascribed to an individual. Caste relationships are established through marriage endogamy and exogamy, rigid occupational ascriptions, and the concept of 'pollution and purity' that manifests itself through the practice of 'untouchability' (Beteille 1996). Although, caste is operative through various subcastes, called 'jatis', the hierarchical system assumes five main categorizations as per the 'varna' system, namely Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishayas, and Shudras. Those belonging to the fifth category, the avarna, were historically excluded from the four-fold varna system and seen and treated as occupying the lowest status. Often referred to as the Dalit community (a term coined by the reformist Jyotibai Phule), they now feature in government policies as 'Scheduled Castes (SCs)'. Historically, these caste groups have been closely associated with particular professions, and the upper castes have benefited from a protracted history of sole ownership of and access to knowledge, land, wealth, and other socioeconomic resources. This historical marginalization is reflected in the current status of the social groups, with lower castes continuing to have the lowest levels of educational access and freedom to choose or access occupations that could enhance their socioeconomic mobility (Mosse 2018; Munshi and Rosenzweig 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Largely synonymous with Adivasis.

<sup>3</sup> A collective term used by the Government of India to classify castes that are socially disadvantaged but not included among SC and ST.

decision-makers. In this, the only precedent for MS was the Women's Development Programme (WDP), which had established this model based on collectivization of the poorest women in Rajasthan, and by which the foundations and methodology of MS were heavily inspired.

The WDP, launched in six districts of Rajasthan in 1984 and later extended to more, was the first programme that moved away from viewing women as objects of welfare. Started and implemented through a process of debate and collaboration between the Government of Rajasthan and two non-governmental agencies—the State Information Development and Resource Agency (IDARA) and the Institute of Development Studies, Jaipur (IDS, an independent research institute)—the programme established that it is possible to (i) to organize groups of the poorest women from Dalit and Adivasi communities; (ii) to train them intensely to take charge of their own lives and start questioning prevalent caste- and gender-based discriminatory practices in their villages; and (iii) to internalize the feminist philosophy as well as terminology, and draw strength from collectives to work on larger systemic issues. The WDP worked through (i) a panchayat-based worker called a sathin, (2) a set of non-negotiable principles, discussed and confirmed through consensus-building, and (3) decentralized objective-setting processes of collective decision-making that were later adopted by MS in its design (Das 1992). The WDP also established that a governmental organization/non-governmental organization (GO-NGO) model could work. However, the WDP was limited to one Indian state whereas MS was a national programme and had a much larger scale to start with.

MS, like the WDP, did not explicitly mention questioning caste relations in its objectives, but it ensured that caste-based discrimination was addressed through its processes of group formation of Dalit women and the choice of priority areas to be taken up for action in the villages. This becomes obvious by examining their mission, structures, and processes, which is what we present next.

## **2.1 Mahila Samakhya: objectives, structure, and processes**

The mission of the programme was to 'neutralise accumulated distortions of the past' and realize the goals of gender equality as enshrined in the Indian constitution. Its broad objectives were as follows (GoI 2008: 1):<sup>4</sup>

1. create an environment for empowerment and education of rural, poor, marginalized women; ensure access to information and knowledge and enable them to play a positive role in their own and society's development;
2. enhance women's self-image and self-confidence; help them to recognize their contribution to the economy as producers and workers;
3. redress traditional gender imbalances in educational access and achievement; create alternate learning pathways and opportunities for women and adolescent girls; enable mahila sanghas (women's groups) to access and monitor various educational initiatives at the village level;
4. establish a decentralized and participative mode of management, where decision-making powers devolve to the district level and the mahila sanghas.

In order to engage with these objectives, the MS programme came up with a structure and methodology that would allow it to tackle the central questions of difference, voice, and agency.

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<sup>4</sup> What is striking, as noted by Jandhyala (2012), is the use of the 1986 Education Policy Statement as the programme objectives of the MS programme. This articulation of objectives remains unchanged throughout all MS documents in successive plan periods as well, and has been verified by multiple sources.

The programme was designed according to a hybrid GO-NGO model and identified certain non-negotiable principles that had to be implemented throughout the programme, regardless of the location, while retaining the freedom for participants to engage with these principles in their own contexts. Some of these principles were:

- The programmatic priorities must be shaped and determined by the people it seeks to benefit.
- The programme must create the space (and the time) to meet, to be together, and to self-reflect.
- Distinctions must be made between education and literacy—the environment of learning is more important than just imparting literacy skills.
- The emphasis is on thinking, analysing, applying, and innovating, instead of simply providing information or creating awareness.
- The process must respect and take into consideration the existing knowledge systems that are prevalent in the context—including women’s existing knowledge, experience, and skill.
- Trainers are not ‘teachers’ but facilitators and co-creators of knowledge. They are not to talk down to the women but instead work with them to explore and understand different forms of knowledge.
- The backing of a strong support system, in terms of training, supervision, resource material, financial resources, and troubleshooting, is required.
- The processes that are being administered must be felt first within the programme—essentially, the idiom of ‘practise what you preach’ must be taken seriously.

Through the structure that it created, MS was able to overcome some of the problems associated with any state programme and achieve decentralized planning, flexibility, and participatory ways of working, while still retaining the reach, resource structure, and authority of a government system (MHRD n.d.: 4; Ramachandran et al. 2012; Sharma, 2006, 2008; Sharma 2011). While the village-level collectives, known as sanghas, formed the foundation of the MS organizational structure, a sound support system was created at various levels—from village to national—with space for active engagement with and participation of local women, feminist groups, and development activists at all stages (MHRD n.d.: 4, as cited in Sharma 2011: 21–22; Sharma 2006, 2008).

The decision to start with the poorest and most deprived meant starting with Dalit or Adivasi communities. Local and cluster-level MS workers, usually known as sakhi and sahayogini, were always identified from among the marginalized communities themselves. They helped the sanghas to identify their needs and capabilities, provided knowledge, and built individual and collective capacity. This, in turn, helped the sangha members to identify, resolve, and start to actively influence their families and their communities.

Over a period of time, the activities in the sangha were grouped in six core areas (education, health, economic empowerment, political participation, violence against women, and federation), and six committees within each sangha were formed to deal with each of these focus areas. By providing continuous training as well as capacity-building and networks that allowed them to exchange knowledge and experience with other sanghas, MS was able not only to influence short-term outcomes but to create long-term impact. The rationale for this methodology was to ensure deep localization and redressal of women’s issues so that targets or specific agendas emerged from the sangha itself, instead of being directed by MS (MHRD n.d.). This ‘conferred on the programme a radical potential for transforming women’s agency and their lived realities’ (Gurumurthy and Batliwala 2012: 456) and allowed the space for women to articulate their own visions for the future.

The process of sangha formation, while not uniform in every state, district, or even sangha, was the product of a particular methodology that was developed and refined over time. On average, the initial process of building a relationship of trust and friendship among groups of women could take six months to a year, and it was highly specific to the interests of the groups. This process usually entailed regular meetings, training, capacity-building, and any activity deemed necessary by the sahayogini and the sangha. A critical aspect of this process was the reflection meetings that the sangha and sahayogini would participate in, which were designed to provide women with the tools to self-reflect, share, re-examine, and think about their gendered experience, common problems that they faced, and structural barriers, including those of class, caste, religion, family, and community, that formed the principal backdrop of their lives.

The principles of equality were enshrined in even the little things. For example, the sahayoginis were instructed to always assemble the group in a circle. This serves two purposes: everyone can see each other and no one is positioned as the leader. To avoid the caste politics of the village, or being embroiled in any power play in the village, the meetings were always in a public space but never in the house of a prominent community member or the caste leader (participation observation, 8 June 2015). Direct engagement with the power hierarchies was also the mainstay of meetings. For example, one of the sahayoginis told us that she would often ask the women why they were not able to eat food from the households of the upper caste. If the women answered that they were considered ‘polluted’ or ‘unclean’, the sahayogini would ask them: ‘if the women can touch the grain [because of harvesting and planting] and it doesn’t get polluted, then how does the rice from which this grain is extracted get polluted?’ (personal interview, 1 September 2016). By posing these questions, MS was able to facilitate deeper discussions of caste dynamics in women’s lives and push them to analyse the roots of this oppression.

## **2.2 The origin and success story: what made it happen?**

Etymologically, ‘Mahila’ means ‘woman’ in many Indian languages and ‘Samakhya’ means ‘equal’ (‘sam’) and ‘voice’ (‘akhya’). So the programme’s name translates roughly into Women Speaking with Equal Voice or Dialogue among Equals (Jandhyala 2012: 230; Ramachandran et al. 2012: 12). The name was carefully and purposely chosen to reflect the objective of empowerment as a transformative process that would challenge patriarchy and various other social structures and barriers (Sharma 2006; Ramachandran et al. 2012). The conceptualization of any public policy is determined by a combination of factors, coming together at an opportune moment in time, and the same is true for MS.

One such factor was that the programme was viewed and designed as an education programme located in the Ministry of Human Resource Development, the new name for the education ministry, and not in the Ministry of Women and Child Development, as one may have expected it to be. This was made possible for several reasons. One, the new Congress government that came into power with a huge majority in 1984 announced the adoption of a new education policy as a major policy commitment (Mangla 2017). An sizeable absolute majority in parliament gave the government a mandate for going ahead with new kinds of policies that would otherwise have been difficult.

The new education policy of 1986 was preceded by a broad policy review with the participation of academia, bureaucrats, elected representatives, civil society, and other stakeholders, leading to a document entitled *Challenge of Education: A Policy Perspective* (Ministry of Education 1985). This document was not only ‘candid in its critique of past failures’ (Mangla 2017: 5) but also provoked a national debate on education (Mangla 2017). This debate led to a long period of consultative process in which the role and participation of the women’s movement was critical (MHRD n.d.: 1; Jandhyala 2003; Das and Agrawal 2004; Sharma 2011; Ramachandran et al. 2012). The MS

programme was launched as a result of this effort, with the drafting of the Programme of Action (POA), 1992, of the National Policy of Education (NPE), 1986. The POA translated the guidelines of empowering women through education (as identified in the section ‘Education for Women’s Equality’ of the NPE) into an action strategy.

This process created a place for an expanded notion of education as ‘acquisition of knowledge’, going beyond formal schooling, literacy, and numeracy alone—an important shift that helped in programmes such as MS to take root. Primarily because of this influence, in its foundational philosophy MS took education to include the entire gamut of women’s empowerment, including critical thinking and reflection; decision-making capabilities; access to information, knowledge, and skills; and creating opportunities for participation in governance, political, and economic spaces.

MS received financial support from multilateral and bilateral agencies such as UNICEF and the Dutch government, another important contributing factor. Buoyed by the global emphasis on women’s empowerment following the Beijing Declaration and the declaration of the period 1975–85 as the UN Decade for Women, funding agencies prioritized programming for feminist philosophy-based women’s empowerment programmes. The Dutch government played an important role in the conceptualization of MS by funding research that later formed the basis for its design (Ramachandran et al. 2012). UNICEF supported many of the WDP’s functions and also funded the extension of MS to Bihar as part of the Bihar Education Project that it funded. These agencies, however, showed their confidence in the Government of India, and respective state governments too, because of the presence of senior bureaucrats who actively supported the promotion of such policies. This brings us to the role of individuals in powerful positions.

Although policy-making is a complex process, especially in a large and diverse country with major structural inequalities like India, by all accounts, individuals matter. Anil Bordia, a senior civil servant of the Rajasthan cadre serving in the Ministry of Human Resource Development at that time, has been credited with promoting the GO-NGO model and bringing together diverse groups to brainstorm ideas, to think through processes together (Ramachandran and Jandhyala 2012). Bordia operated in a policy and political environment where diverse views could co-exist and the state provided space for experimentation with ideas in education. For instance, while Bordia supported non-formal education going beyond the rigid structure of formal schooling, the prime minister himself wanted a more formal residential system of schooling to be taken to rural areas (Mangla 2017). That both of these two diverging viewpoints found a place in the policy and scheme formulation space is reflective of the possibility of multiple approaches co-existing at the same time in that period.

Once these factors came together to push the idea of MS, the programme was designed, implemented, and expanded to newer areas with vigour and commitment, leading to notable successes on many counts. The success of the MS programme primarily rested on the methodology of collectivization. The process of creating a sangha was simple but not easy. The programme started by identifying the most impoverished districts within the state and, within the district, the least well performing blocks in terms of women’s literacy and a higher percentage of Dalit and Adivasi or other marginalized communities. Within these blocks, villages and hamlets of the marginalized communities were chosen. MS would then hold many meetings in the villages with the village elders, the panchayat, and various groups to get a sense of the dynamics in the village (personal interview, 30 April 2016), and would start recruiting capable women with some literacy skills to become sahayoginis. Capability was measured based on whether the women themselves felt confident that they could do the job and would be able to work with whatever constraints were thrown their way (personal interview, 30 April 2016).

As the sanghas started to function with the help of the sahayoginis, the women from the collective moved from an inability to go outside without the permission of their husbands to going to the cities to join state-wide protests. The time that it took to transition from making tentative statements of their problems to actively strategizing to solve village problems was different for different sanghas. While sahayoginis were supportive of the sangha, there was a genuine understanding that social empowerment has a process of its own and must be given the time to evolve (personal interview, 1 September 2016). Apart from this methodology that allowed each sangha in the programme, regardless of location (social or geographical), to find its own path to a vision of empowerment, there were several enabling factors that allowed this process to take place.

Intense and continuous training focused on creating an understanding of the structural nature of oppression. This, followed by information on rights and entitlements, led to transformative experiences for many. For instance, one woman shared how she understood the difference between a collective and a crowd—sangha and bheed: while members of a crowd have no accountability towards each other and act in their own self-interest, a collective is working towards building something and changing something (personal interview, 30 April 2016). These processes included engagement with adolescent girls and women through participatory methodologies, games, and outdoor activities, often designed to build a bond while simultaneously defying community norms. For instance, a moonlight dinner was organized to ensure that women could be out of their homes at the night, creating the shared experiences and memories necessary for building long-lasting bonds among women from different social positions.

MS influenced the economic empowerment of women, their awareness of laws and entitlements, their self-confidence and self-image (Jha et.al 2019). Gains were also made with respect to individual decision-making, political participation, and attitudes to gender-based violence. Apart from this long-term impact of the programme, even in stressful times, we were able to directly observe its short-term impact in three critical areas, discussed below.

### *2.2.1 Financial knowledge of and decision-making by women*

One of the first issues that most sanghas tackled was the financial independence of the women and enhancing their information channels so that they could start to make decisions themselves. For example, if ration cards were not available,<sup>5</sup> or the ration was late in coming to the village, or if there were no schoolteachers in the village, this would invariably be brought up in discussions. The sahayogini would then start to talk to women about what they could do. The priorities set by the women, therefore, naturally varied from sangha to sangha and from state to state. We observed that in Karnataka, the emphasis of women was on building their own savings to move away from dependency on money lenders.

Training, therefore, started to be conducted to ensure that women could handle their own money, go to the bank, learn how to use an ATM, and apply for funds from the government as a group, so that the sangha could provide a financial safety net. We also observed that the sahayogini herself never handled the money. Her role was to provide information on how to manage money, but never to handle it herself (participation observation, 8 June 2015). Another rule that we observed and that was explicitly spoken about in meetings was that even if the sahayogini was in disagreement, the decisions made by the women were sacred and therefore to be respected.

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<sup>5</sup> A ration card is directed towards marginalized and poor families and entitles a family to access to food and other articles, such as kerosene.

### *2.2.2 Learning and skills*

MS knew that the building of confidence, ability, and fearlessness was going to be a slow process, but was integral to renegotiating relationships within women's households or in public spaces (Menon-Sen 2012). In fact, one of the sangha members proudly told us that in the beginning, they were not even able to go to their neighbour's house, but now they could build their own sangha huts (mahilakutirs) by figuring out how to acquire the land, whom to meet so that they could seek to be allocated their land, how to budget to design the hut, hire the proper contractors, source the materials, build the hut, and manage it for future use (focus group discussion, 17 January 2016).

Even though many women started to build their literacy skills through the MS programme (Bhog and Ghose 2012), they also started to find ways to work around limited literacy. In our conversations with sangha women in Kaimur, we heard an anecdote of a woman Sarpanch (head of the panchayat) who had held her post for a number of years. Despite being only functionally literate, she had a reputation for knowing even the minutest of details of the budgets as well as an almost encyclopedic knowledge of people and government schemes. When she needed to read notices, she would get one of the literate panchayat members to read it out for her, and she would remember it from then on. Another example was when a cook fired because of her caste learned how to petition the district magistrate and get herself reinstated within the same kitchens (focus group discussion, 27 April 2016). The women in the sangha told us that apart from moral support, women learned a lot from each other in terms of dealing with the world and gaining skills to engage with it.

### *2.2.3 Attitudes towards themselves*

Perhaps the most important thing that MS provided to women was to change the way that they viewed themselves. For example, when a landlord threatened to evict an entire community from lands that he wanted, the collective decided to file a case of displacement in court, with the help of other sangha women in the village. They were able not only to prosecute the landlord but also to re-establish their homestead and build their own huts. The sahayogini who told us this stated, with a lot of pride, 'it was the women themselves who did this—they filed the court case on their own. We didn't need to help them at all' (personal interview, 6 May 2016).

The women told us that these small discussions helped to create tremendous self-confidence in their ability to effect change in their communities, and bound them closer to each other. Women were constantly pushed to engage with questions of their own self and identity (Menon-Sen 2012). In almost all of our interviews, there was discussion of how women started to feel more empowered as they started to be known not as someone's wife, or someone's daughter, or someone's mother, but as themselves (focus group discussion, 29 August 2016). In fact, the owning of their name was so important that a few women gave their own name to their children. When school administrators protested, the women fought back, claiming that the mother is the only 'proven' parent of the child. The father could potentially be anyone. So they would put their own name down for their children's admission.

These small shifts are quite significant, if we take into consideration the massive pushback that women from Dalit and Adivasi communities face for asserting their rights within the larger social system. But then why was MS closed instead of being nurtured and expanded? A lot had changed between the 1980s and the 2010s both in the world of development and in the world of politics—nationally and internationally. The closure story that we discuss next elaborates on and locates the closure of MS in this milieu while also analysing the internal inconsistencies and cracks that had appeared in the programme over time.

### 3 The closure story

The MS programme was shut down at short notice by the Government of India, which merely stated that the programme would not be funded after 31 March 2016. MS operated in states as a ‘Centrally Sponsored Programme’ (CSS) with funding support from the union government. The union government had started MS with funding support from the Dutch government through bilateral aid, and it later continued with international funding using three sources: UNICEF supported it in Bihar as a component of the Bihar Education Project, the World Bank supported it as part of the District Primary Education Project in a few states, and the UK’s Department for International Development (DfID) supported it in states for a limited period, when the Dutch government stopped supporting the programme. Once these projects ended, the programme was supported through internal funding support via the Government of India’s internal sources. This was despite the fact that the budget for MS was minuscule compared with the country’s overall budget: MS needed roughly US\$12–14,000 annually, out of a total budget of about \$289–90 billion (less than 0.005 per cent) during that period (Sarup 2020).

The closure was sudden and unexpected. Before the closure announcement, based on a decision taken by Cabinet ministers of the Government of India, the only indication that the government was probably not going to fund the programme came in the form of delayed payments, and delayed reaction to any requests for future funding. There was no consultation with the implementing states, and there were none of the other official procedures typical of closing down a programme funded under CSS. No official reason was given for the closure of the programme. In order to trace the reason for it, we need to understand both the politics and the economics of such steps.

One common feature of the origin and closure of MS was the presence of a government with a huge majority. In 2014, the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) lost the elections and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), led by the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), came to power with an absolute majority. In a broader sense, this also meant a move away from centrist to rightist ideology. While neat ideology-based distinctions are difficult to make in terms of economic policies, on social policies the difference was marked. For instance, the new rightist government was opposed to any civil-society-based policy interventions, especially those that followed GO-NGO models. Moreover, the RSS (Rashtriya Swamsewak Sangha), from which the BJP draws its main Hindutwa ideology, is against ‘Western’ feminist ideas (Mazumdar 1994) and notions of gender equality. It would have been antithetical to their value systems to support a programme like MS. It is not difficult to surmise this despite the absence of any evidence or knowledge about the policy discussions leading to the decision, which was largely taken behind closed doors and is not recorded in a way available in the public domain.

However, while highlighting the role of ideology, it is also important to recognize the shifts that had taken place in the wider development discourse both nationally and internationally, which also contributed to the demise of MS. In the course of three decades, the discourse had moved away from a process-based understanding of discrimination and inequality to evidence based on randomized controlled trials, wherein programmes like MS found it difficult to make a mark. This was despite the presence of a good number of independent studies, following rigorous methodologies, showing the impact of MS in influencing deep-rooted social norms (Jha and Menon 2016). This changed development landscape, in terms of assessment and emphasis, brought many challenges to MS, including that of budgets:

budgets were getting squeezed due to the overriding government priority to allocate [the] bulk of the education outlay towards high profile national

programmes for elementary and secondary education. Little was left for slower, process-oriented but effective programmes like MS. (Sarup 2020: 15)

Another major challenge faced by MS, especially during the later years, was the deluge of self-help groups (SHGs) arriving in the rural economy. By one count, there were at least 50 SHGs in just one village in the state of Karnataka, if Shree Shakti Programme (SSP) groups, Dharmasthala groups, and Swayam Siddhi groups are included. In another village, there were six men's sanghas and 18 women's sanghas. Consequently, when MS also wanted to enter there, most of the women MS spoke to were not interested in forming yet another sangha and going to yet another series of meetings (participation observation, 1 December 2015). Another problem was the bad experiences associated with SHGs. As many of these SHGs were not regulated, they were many cases of corruption and misuse of funds, and a general lack of trust was prevalent. A number of women complained about the inefficient ways in which the associations they had joined were functioning. They were reluctant to form any new group with members of the community after having had such bad experiences with them.

An ancillary problem associated with having a large number of SHGs was that a lot of women were also defaulters in the banking system and heavily in debt. Some women were so overdrawn from participating in various SHGs that they were not allowed to borrow any money within the community (personal interview, 11 January 2016). The social landscape having been inundated with a SHGs and a debtors meant that MS had to struggle very hard to engage women in issues related to gender, health, education, or even schemes and entitlements. This would not have been the case if the indiscriminate growth of SHGs had been regulated, and gender conscientization had been made an essential feature of the microfinance movement by aligning its broader objectives, or those of a specific SHGs, with a programme like MS.

Apart from negotiating these spaces, MS also had to engage with feelings of fatigue among the women. While none of the women articulated it as such, we found that in a lot of inactive or poorly functioning sanghas, these feelings were predominant in the attitudes and behaviour of the women. Part of the problem was women's workload in terms of both care work and unpaid work. Women were free only for parts of the day, usually during the evening hours before their evening meals, and they were reluctant to engage in anything apart from rest in these times. Even when MS held meetings at times when they were free, some members had to leave because of their paid or care work commitments (P0,4Feb2016).

Akin to these feelings of fatigue was also a sense of jadedness that permeated some of the sanghas. For example, one of the things MS had tried to promote was corruption-free elections. Sahayoginis spoke about the importance of not taking money for voting, but some sangha members had no faith in any elected body. They largely felt that the election was the only time where marginalized communities such as theirs could get any benefits at all. While this is an astute strategic political decision made by communities, it became more difficult for MS to get women to see themselves as active citizens and engage in activities that would push local government towards more accountability. Compounding the matter was the non-co-operation of the village administration (panchayat members, anganwadi workers, teachers, etc.), who did not always understand or support the work of MS at the local level (private interview, 21 July 2015).

Perhaps, the most difficult challenge that MS faced—and an often unseen one—was the difference that training, personality, and experience made in terms of creating positive social processes. One of the most characteristic features of any long-functioning sangha (even if defunct at some stage) was the verve, strength, and courage that certain women were able to bring to each of their actions. According to these women, this is attributable to their training within MS, the knowledge and experience they amassed through the years, and the support they received from their community

of sisters. But we realized that there was also an interpersonal angle to the success of sanghas that is not always captured by the structure or the process, and that potentially could be attributed to 'personality'. For instance, we witnessed some sanghas that were functioning thanks to the sheer will imposed by certain members or by the sahayogini, and these elements of chance are harder to capture and replicate than other factors. These elements of 'unknowns' are woven into most public policy ventures and in certain circumstances, they can tackle the problem of difference more effectively because of it. But in certain circumstances, especially when the context lacks resources (human, social, or economic), these unknowns can mean that the methodology works counter to its purpose, especially when we see the sahayogini becoming a figure of immense power in what should be a space of equals.

This is especially important to note given that in societies with high levels of ethnic diversity, well-constructed policies such as those behind MS can become gradually blind to these small differences and variations in power (Bangura 2005). Especially in a policy where the objective is the empowerment of women, moving away from the foundations of the philosophy or supporting the needs of one community over another can create greater polarization, leading to further marginalization. If we examine the landscape of India as a concentrated multipolar ethnic state, where multiple ethnicities and social structures intersect in the form of religion, caste, region, and language (Bangura 2005), it is important to engage significantly with perspective-building so as to understand the ramifications of intersectionality in the field, such as the duality of oppression through gender and caste. The slow creep of the 'cult of the personality', whether that of the sahayogini or of any other member in the sangha, is likely to start to dominate the interests of the overall group and to erode the emancipation ideals and potential of the sangha.

Another major factor that impacted the steady development of MS throughout the years is the resistance built into any form of structural change. Most often than not, we think about social change in a linear fashion, making headway through structural obstacles as a result of changes in discourse, awareness, and the actions of people. Yet what we found in our review of literature, analyses of the data in Bihar (Jha et.al 2019), and ethnographic understanding of the situation in Karnataka was that the trajectory of MS was plagued by institutional changes that were seen as necessary for scale but detrimental to empowerment, in addition to the discourse changes that adapted and normalized the 'radical' nature of empowerment proposed by the model.

For instance, as the programme started to become more institutionalized, the focus on the literacy qualification of sahayoginis (rather than their field experience) started to feature in the hiring practices of MS, in response to the increasing bureaucratization of the system. When the programme started to scale, the bureaucratic requirements of evaluations, budgeting, and planning did not remain oral. For sangha women, this meant that only a select few (literate) women could move up the channels to assume leadership roles within MS. This change in the recruitment and mobility channels within MS led to the shifting of the cultural traditions from the oral to the written form, which had adverse implications for the overall empowerment goal for sangha women (Jha et al. 2019).

In short, while it is clear that MS was a powerful conduit through which women could enhance their own self-esteem and confidence, the power wielded by a systemic and structural force of discrimination and exclusion, which is also enshrined in the governance processes, cannot be underplayed or underestimated. This has implications for both the politics of policy-making and its impact on inequality. While at ground level, fissures appeared in terms of power relations in interpersonal relationships and within the groups of women, at higher levels the demand for greater 'accountability' led to pressures for definite targets to be set and for high reach and coverage instead of a flexible process that allowed each sangha and unit to set their goals, taking their own context into account. The language of discourse also posed a problem at times: the idiom of

women's solidarity and a new feminist self-image which MS functionaries, including sahayoginis and sangha women, had internalized was alien to others, making communications difficult—something that the WDP had also experienced (Das 1992). What made things worse was the resource crunch that MS started to face well before its closure.

Prior to the sudden closure of MS in March 2016, there were periods in which the MS programme was not properly funded. The funds were always delayed, and there was a lot of uncertainty regarding when funds would be dispersed. This uncertainty meant that almost all of the activities were primarily built on the uncompensated labour of sahayoginis and MS staff. In fact, MS functioned entirely without funding for 18 months of the three-year period during which we were observing their activities in Karnataka. In some cases, MS staff drew on their own savings to conduct some of the activities. While this strategy was feasible for women who had some financial resources, for those who were already from marginalized communities it was untenable. In fact, some of them could no longer afford rent and food, and many started to consider taking loans or taking their children out of schools, just to be able to manage their household. In such circumstances, the sahayoginis felt highly demotivated and discouraged despite the fact that they saw their work as meaningful and after working with MS, found it difficult to adjust to a different philosophy (personal interview, 11 January 2016).

One of the first issues faced because of the resource constraints was the ways in which the methods and protocols were followed by the sanghas. When MS was functioning with full funding, we were able to document the systematic ways in which problems in the village were identified and action plans were conceptualized. But with the shrinking of funds, the scope and vision of activities had to be reduced. This meant that sahayoginis could not support the fledgling sanghas with the structure of regular meetings, training, and vision-making. This heavily influenced the nature and culture of the sanghas being built. For example, if women expressed concerns over issues of water or the lack of a teacher in the schools, MS was unable to follow up on the action taken, enquire about the resolutions, or help the women out in any concrete way because of lack of time and resources.

Another major problem was the lack of training. Capacity-building was one of the cornerstones of the MS programme. With the reduction in funding, training was compromised with respect not only to individual sanghas, but also to sahayoginis. The point of the training was not necessarily knowledge provision but perspective-building. It focused primarily on conversations around concepts of equality, discrimination, systemic forms of oppression, and citizenship rights. We found that a lack of training translated into varied philosophical stances on the ground, sometimes removed from the core philosophical principles. For example, as mentioned earlier, the sahayogini might take the role of providing information to leverage a position of authority and leadership, sometimes acting against the interest of the sangha. The sahayogini, who was to be a sister and an equal to the sakhis, thus started to work in the capacity of a government functionary, treating the sangha as a 'beneficiary'.

More significantly, the lack of training in the fundamentals of feminist principles, , and citizenship meant that groups (formed without the benefit of adequate resources) had no opportunities to imbibe or be exposed to a sense of a sangha—essentially, a sense of working together with a vision of what they could achieve collectively. So the importance of meetings was not merely to hold them, but to use them to build a space where women could start to form a collective identity.

What emerges from this analysis is that although the decision to close MS was sudden and unexplained, the demise actually came after a slow process that marginalized the programme because of resource constraints, pressures of unsuitable accountability, and more importantly, norms and demands that were inconsistent with its design and philosophy. Using the MS

experience, our last section of the paper discusses the politics of caste, gender, collectivization, and policy-making.

#### **4 The politics of caste, gender, policy-making, and collectivization**

The roots of any form of marginalization, especially those of caste, are deep, strong, and complex. We know that the discourse on ethnic or caste inequality is structured around historical deprivation and the resultant marginalization faced by particular groups of people. When these groups are women from particular caste groups or Adivasi tribes, their experience is tainted with the inequalities that naturally arise from the systemic and systematic inequalities of income, wealth, access to resources and institutions, social capital, and degrees of freedom (to be, to move, to love, etc.).

The power relationships that underlie these deprivations arise from a complex interaction of class formation, social stratification, and ethnic differentiation (Michalopoulos and Papaioannou 2012) that are not static and are highly political in nature (Bangura 2005). The MS programme sought to tackle these systemic deprivations by not individuating women's identity but by placing them within the contexts of their family, community, and society. MS felt that mobilizing groups of women to articulate and address those needs would not only tap into their collective strength, but would also allow them to create and sustain community responses to systemic problems (Jandhyala 2012). The MS programme, in that sense, was taking advantage of the larger forces that were in play. In both Bihar and Karnataka, the Dalit movement, for example, has been a major cultural force. Many social reformers in both regions have led social and cultural movements against untouchability, the caste system, the marginalization of Adivasi communities, and the Brahminical domination of institutional structures.

These movements, however, sought to recognize power relationships across caste, and sought protection of 'endangered woman' instead of looking at the empowerment of women as citizens with their own rights and lines of marginalization (Omvedt 1993). By neglecting the multiple sources of structural, institutionalized notions of power and dominance, there is a possibility that the needs of one group (whether caste or gender or religion) are prioritized over others through discursive practices which in turn legitimize the production of historical domination (Van Dijk 1994). What MS was trying to articulate in its methodology is the redressal of these power dynamics—not by creating a simplistic zero-sum game of power struggles but by engaging with negotiations of powerful spaces through the miasma of caste, gender, religion, shared history, geography, language, and individual subjectivity and identity. In the most fundamental way, MS was trying to engage women from marginalized groups not as a product of their multiple identities, but as an emergent catalytic force that could potentially transform structures and institutions through collectivization and social interaction (Bangura 2005). It was precisely because the programme was able to see women *not* as a singular entity that they were able to engage with the contradictory and diverse patriarchal and normative discourses that were directed at and through them.

Based on the lessons learned from the feminist movement, the framework of MS was not directed towards changing society's view of women; instead, it was focused on changing women's view of themselves. The primary idea was to 'redress centuries of marginalization' (Jandhyala 2012: 107), and put women in the driver's seat. The lessons that were able to be brought to bear through the methodology of MS are: (i) solidarity is central to individual empowerment, (ii) empowerment cannot be defined from outside, and (iii) empowerment processes cannot have a set boundary or a time limit.

Another major learning point in engaging with the politics of caste, gender, or region was the importance of consciousness-raising activities, encouragement of political participation, and questioning of the status quo by women, including traditions, stereotypes, and discriminatory practices. When key elements of training and perspective-building are diluted because of lack of resources, changes in emphasis, or antagonistic/apathetic political climate, we find that the quality of the strength and solidarity of the sangha is compromised. Also, when increased bureaucratization moves programmes away from the embedded contexts from which women's issues emanate, the methodology ceases to function as a methodology. So, the nature of education, training, and perspective-building, as conceptualized by MS, is not piecemeal but additive, continuous, and highly responsive.

In order for this space to function, it is also important to keep the experiences of marginalized women in the foreground. For example, in Bihar the emphasis on ensuring that women who were on the periphery of power take centre stage in the sangha is informed by the personal experiences of the first State Project Director (SPD), Sister Sujitha. She explained to us that when she was working with the Musahars,<sup>6</sup> she typically did not work with upper-caste communities. One day, a poor widowed Brahmin woman asked if she could attend one of their meetings. The SPD thought that perhaps, her own stance against having upper-caste people joining in these meetings was wrong, and that she should open them up to the wider community. The meeting started, and after a short while, the Brahmin woman started speaking and would not allow others to speak. During this whole time, the Musahars, usually very vocal in these meetings, became silent. At the end of the meeting, the SPD realized that her instincts about not allowing upper-caste communities within these spaces had been right. She felt that when people have been oppressed for a long time, they must first realize for themselves that 'they are precious' (personal interview, 16 December 2015). They must first build confidence and dignity, and only then can there be any conversations between upper castes and Dalits. This process cannot be cut short, and centuries of oppression cannot be erased easily. She told us that in order to build a dialogue among equals, there must be spaces to reclaim one's voice, to cultivate a realization of one's own self-worth before others can be included in the conversation.

The methodology of MS operationalized principles of collectivization and created the sangha as this safe space. It was clear from the very beginning that the sangha was the instrument that would 'enable women to plan, implement, and direct their own empowerment' (Jandhyala 2012: 107). The policy climate at the time of inception was invested in examining the relationship between gender and other forms of marginalization such as that based on caste, religion, region, political participation, and education. They also realized, from bitter experience, that institutional or legal changes were not enough to create self-sustaining social change. For example, in 1993, affirmative action policies allowed women to participate in governance (Mohanty 1995), but feminist groups soon realized that these policies were inadequately implemented, leading to a lot of pushback, particularly using the means of physical violence, rape, or the threat of violence.

So, focus shifted to methods or processes of collectivization that would provide women with the language, ability, and tools to fight within their own communities to create discourses of freedom and choice over their own bodies. The sangha as the object of this collectivization was designed to do precisely that. Another reason for using the sangha was the potential for intense localization and diversity of effort. The sangha as a self-contained unit was also chosen because feminists did not want 'strategic' alliances, common among activist groups, to be the modus operandi of

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<sup>6</sup> Consisting of three endogamous clans, Musahars are one of the most deprived Dalit communities in Bihar, often derogatively called the rat-eaters, referring to their former occupation of catching rats due to extreme destitution and poverty.

structural change. In order to address the intersectional nature of discrimination and oppression, they wanted long-term alliances between women's collectives that were fundamentally aligned to ensure equality of voice. So institution building was the basis for all work that was done in MS and the women were not seen as 'targets or beneficiaries but as agents of change' (Jandhyala 2012: 111).

Moreover, the very idea of creating a separate space for women, in and of itself, was revolutionary. It 'opened up new worlds, provided a forum for discovering and voicing one's views and opinions' (Krishnamurthy 2012: 77), and also enabled women to explore community identities that were singularly tied not to kinship or to caste but to new frameworks of connection. MS also felt that policies of the state were too much directed towards individual-based outcomes. But given that inequalities are perpetuated by structures and institutions, it felt that these individuated policy targets or framework were not useful in the long term. Unless changes happened at the institutional level, influenced by collectives of women, it would be harder to transform the relationships between women, their families, and their communities, which in turn could potentially transform formal institutions and systems of structural oppression.

Learning from the structures of inequalities—such as caste—MS realized that ties in the form of networks can be a critical resource that provides access to otherwise inaccessible resources, preservation, and protection (Munshi 2016). In fact, in MS, existing community relationships were used effectively to negotiate conflicts in the political construction of interests, to move towards frames of empowerment. Through these negotiations, women could create their own unique mix of various dimensions of empowerment, including self-reliance, equality, autonomy, and independence. Women had at their disposal a set of tools and they could use them in whatever manner was distinctly suited to them (focus group discussion, 27 April 2016).

The women started to realize that knowledge of entitlements and benefits was only one small step to changing the status quo imposed by their social and economic status. In a scheme in one of the villages, trees and plants intended to be distributed to Dalit communities were being diverted to the homes of the upper-caste families. During one of the sangha meetings, when the women complained about this, the sahayogini asked them to go the gram sabha and raise the issue. She advised them that knowing is only part of the solution—they also needed to do something about it. The women, buoyed by the encouragement, told the sahayogini that they were sick and tired of waiting and 'fed up' with the mistreatment, and that they would not let this issue drop as they typically did (participant observation, 14 May 2016). They then made a formal resolution and specific plans to go to the gram sabha and make their objections known.

The localization of articulation also poses some difficulties. For example, it has been documented that often some MS women will support the patriarchal notion that a girl who has been raped should be married to the rapist to save her honour. In these circumstances, the honour of the family (and of the girl) is considered more important than the idea of justice (Krishnamurthy 2012). The notion of empowerment within MS, therefore, should not be imagined as a feminist utopia. Instead, we need to examine what it means when empowerment, in and of itself, is articulated by women, when they have the space and time and the ability to do so. When the attention moves from an individual's idea of empowerment to a collective idea of utopia, we can then start to think of long-lasting and self-sustaining impact on women's lives.

In fact, one of the strongest impressions that we were often left with after meeting sangha women is that of camaraderie, a sense of shared history and deep trust. It is evident even in the slightest of interactions that the shared experience of structural oppression and personal journeys was as important to the sangha women as the knowledge that they had gained. For example, Kalyani Menon-Sen (2012) writes eloquently about how women were able to share and exchange their life

stories and feel love, strength, and affection. This kind of bonding, often referenced in feminist literature, was actively cultivated within the sangha. A woman who had been working with MS since its inception told us that empowerment as a process was not something that can be seen; it is something that must be experienced—‘Dekhne wali cheez nahi hain; anubhav karne ki cheez hain’. She also asked us, ‘How do you measure an internal shift?’ (personal interview, 16 December 2015). This question is particularly pertinent because of the preponderance of evidence-based policy-making that has started to dominate the entire discourse of policy construction.

Evidence-based policy-making comes across as the most desirable process to make astute policies, especially in the context of the modern democratic world. Researchers around the world, especially those who are externally funded (by bilateral, multilateral, or international organizations), are especially subject to the pressures of showcasing evidence for policy influence. The development literature often assumes a neat time-frame of research cycle, policy advocacy, and policy influence, which is often not feasible in reality, especially in contexts where one is dealing with issues of ethnicity and inequality. Groups formed in the name of solidarity to fight oppression ‘need to be able to progress slowly, to meander, to deal with reverse movements and backlash, and to determine what progression is relevant and suitable to each context ... Attempting to match this to development programming appears destined to failure’ (Sudarshan 2015: 14).

While evidence is and should always be important as a strong foundation for policy-making, whether it is in the conception or the demise of the programme, they are also subject to the same structural forces as the policies they advocate for. The political nature of the conversations was the main thing that fuelled the government to support a radical GO-NGO women’s empowerment model. When the political climate turned to embrace more output-oriented frameworks, the support shifted. The presence of NGOs, a strong positive force during the conception of MS, was derided and demonized by the time the programme ended. These political winds were the central forces behind the closure of the MS programme.

Moreover, when we engage with the enterprise of dismantling social structures, such as those of gender and caste, this is inherently dangerous to those in power. For example, it is easier for the government to support microfinancing organizations, because they do not lead to any forms of pushback. However, if a framework of collectivization is used which questions power structures or demands accountability as a citizen, it can easily lead to a disruption in the status quo. So, women’s empowerment, especially when the women are from historically impoverished classes, is ‘safe’ as long as they are not bound to dismantle the politics of caste that the political machinery is engaged in. It is only dangerous when these relationships start to be questioned.

It is important to note that while there was a bureaucracy that was supportive, the social contexts in which MS started its operations were not women-friendly. The health, education, and justice infrastructures in the country were either non-existent or detrimental for women. There were ‘medieval prejudices’ around the movement of women, education, marriage, and other social practices (Ramachandra 2012: 70), and violence against women in all social classes was high. The MS programme was targeting reforms in areas that were fundamentally set against women. At the time, to create ‘spaces of equality’ and ‘spaces for self-reflection’ was a revolutionary notion (and it continues to be so). However, when the political climate of policy-making changes, then policies that reaffirm notions of equality and empowerment are also affected.

To conclude, what we have learned from examining the beginning and end of MS is simple. The first lesson is that there are ways in which a set of well-structured, well-tested, and well-designed philosophies and methods can transform social structures and the lives of women from marginalized communities, but we have also learned that space and time is necessary for Dalit and

Adivasi women to forge their own pathways. The second lesson is that this ‘space and time’, which needs support and nurturing in the form of commitment to the same value systems, enabling non-bureaucratic processes to take root, ensuring resource flow, and facilitating the emergence of new ways of evidence-making and accountability that are consistent with the values and philosophy of the programme, is not easy to come by in the form of policy support unless there is a strong alignment with the political philosophy of the ruling classes. MS was a relatively small programme, but it signified a philosophy that was inconsistent with the ruling party’s view of women’s empowerment, and hence it was deemed undesirable. Since it was ‘small’, its sudden closure did not even invite any outrage except in a small circle of activists and academia. The third lesson is that the systemic weakening of the resource support, causing financial as well as institutional stress, can also be a slow and sure way of killing a programme. The political economy of policy-making is such that even the symbolic representation of a chosen policy counts. This is precisely why the fourth and final lesson we draw is that it is important to be strategic in refocusing on the building of a collective feminist emancipatory imagination, and rediscovering its potential to transform women’s lives by exploring newer reconfigurations of political economic forces, at both local and global levels.

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