

Sangeetha Purshothaman. *The Empowerment of Women in India—Grassroots Women's Network and the State.* New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1998. Hardbound. Indian Rs 450.00. Paperback. Indian Rs 250.00. 384 pages.

This study discusses the impact of the new organisational structure emerging in India to improve the status of rural women. The objectives of the study are twofold: first, it intends to explore the possibility of small organisations working together to have an impact at the local level; the second issue is the sustainability of such an arrangement. The study concentrates on the experience of the Swayam Shaikshan Prayog (SSP) in the Indian state of Maharashtra. The basic theme of this organisational set-up is that women know best what they want and what solutions work for them. The SSP's networking process allows for an organisation which can bargain, interface with, and transfer resources from the state to poor women, as well as maintain the flexibility to adapt to statewide policy changes and the local conditions faced by them.

The misuse of the women's cause in the 1960s and the 1970s led to an increasing number of poor women participating specifically in women's movements. The structure of the SSP evolved as a result of a long history of interaction between non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and women's groups. It started, in 1980, with the efforts of women's organisations within villages and resulting in collectives at the village level, which, later on, worked to influence the state structures and policies within Maharashtra. The critical issue, in the SSP's attempts for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres (SSP-SPARC) and to influence the state policy, was the emphasis of the organisations to combine macroeconomic and local strategy to change the economic conditions of women. Women's groups were strengthened by internal dialogue and by building up the bargaining strength and capacities of these groups. This process gave them the time to reflect collectively on what their needs were, what would work for them and what would not. The comparison of SSP with the performance of other women's groups shows that most of these organisations were unable to reach the target group. The women at SSP, prior to approaching the government, decided on the economic activities they wanted and then tried to gain entry in those government programmes which could fund these activities. As a result, now the women decide about the form of activities they want, about the money required, and who would participate and how they would do so.

The SSP network includes about 40 NGOs and collectives whose mass base consists mainly of poor women's groups from at least seven districts of Maharashtra. The SSP organisation and collectives were involved in exchanges since 1988 and gradually formed a decentralised, informal, loosely structured network of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and women's collectives. The emphasis of the organisation is on learning through interaction, exchange, and training. The network

of small organisations facilitates the participation of all members within a community in decision-making, and it is flexible and broad enough to accommodate the needs of the poor women.

The network also aims to create an accountability structure, where individual women are accountable to collectives, the organisations are accountable to collectives, networks are accountable to local organisation and women's collectives, and the government is accountable to poor women. The SSP has the characteristics of both small and large organisations, as it can quickly implement policies like a small organisation and has the capacity to develop pressure group tactics like a large organisation. The SSP is also a combination of the formal and informal; it is formal with the small units, informal in terms of decision-making by allowing sustained participation of poor women. The SSP also emphasises on group welfare and not on individual welfare.

The study argues that contemporary social movement theories are not very effective in dealing with issues in Third World countries. The existing theories emphasise that large centralised networks are more effective in bargaining as compared to decentralised and small organisations like the SSP. The success of the large organisations lies in their ability to redistribute resources among their constituents, whereas the small NGOs are unable to deal with government bureaucracy successfully due to its rigid behaviour and non-response to the poor. Existing organisations, like the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), Sarva Sewa Farms (AASEFA), Cooperative Development Fund (CDF), and Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA), are examples of large organisations which were successful in mobilising the target groups. But these are centralised and structural organisations working particularly with urban middle-class women, whereas SSP organisations are smaller and less structured for rural poor women and rely on a mass base to bargain. This organisational set-up is based on the idea that in order to understand the change in social philosophy, there is a need to examine the changes at the grassroots level.

Field research for the study was conducted in 11 months. During this period the author observed the negotiations conducted between organisations, women's groups, and the government at the village, block, district, and state level. Case studies were conducted in four districts in Maharashtra, viz., Gadchiroli, Nanded, Osmanabad, and Yavatmal. The staff of the SSP organisation, women's groups, banks, and government offices were interviewed. The information on income, caste, education, and occupation of women was collected from the 20 women's groups. The women in these groups were also asked: Why was the collective/organisation started? What are the advantages of being a member of the group? The results showed that low literacy was the major reason for starting a

group as illiterate women can not keep accounts and records, which is necessary to obtain government resources. The organisation helped the poor women to overcome this difficulty.

The study links the new form of organisational set-up to the material conditions of its members. The evidence shows that the impact of earlier major economic developments, like the Green Revolution, on women is mixed. Some studies report that the Green Revolution led to an increase in female wage labour, in the form of casual workers, whereas other studies note a decline in female agriculture labour and rising inequality in the wage rates for men and women, and lower annual earnings of women leading to a rise in the poverty level in rural areas. Feudal relations, state-led capitalist growth, castism, communism, and patriarchy, each played a role with different implications for women and men. Both women and men are increasingly concentrated in this informal sector. However, the women are working mainly in the subsistence sector and are less integrated in the money economy. Given this adverse position, the women are forming collectives within villages. These collectives aim to first establish and increase the visibility of women and later help them to articulate their grievances, as well as seek collective solutions through joint production and ownership.

Interestingly, of women's poor material conditions resulted in the creation of women's organisations with decentralised informal structures attempting to improve the participation of women in the economic and political decision-making process. This interaction includes specific issues like training on savings, specific economic activities, interaction with financial institutions, information dissemination, cultural events, and resource generation, if needed. In this way, the network made an optimum use of resources through increased communication and resource sharing.

The impact of the SSP on women can be summarised as follows.

- (1) Availability of credit from alternative sources has resulted in reduced dependence on money-lenders.
- (2) Depending on the type of economic activity, the availability of funds from the government and the banks has increased.
- (3) The women leaders gained experience in dealing with the government and other institutions directly.
- (4) The interaction with other collectives and women's groups has improved their learning of new activities and skills, including thrift and credit.
- (5) Through the SSP, the women were obtaining a collective voice in their villages.

- (6) The interaction resulted in a change in the social relations between men and women within villages, and between women's groups and government officials.
- (7) The SSP organisation now includes income generation, thrift, and credit for women as part of their regular activities.
- (8) Formal registration of small organisations with the SSP Secretariat was resisted because of the requirements of government audit within two years of registration. While some organisations were able to convince government officials and qualified for government funds without registration, others had to register to have access to government funds.
- (9) The bargaining power of the organisation *vis-à-vis* the government changed. Now the government realises the role of the NGOs. The attitude is changing. More organisations are planning to join the network.
- (10) The lobbying efforts of the network have resulted in increased access to government funds by a bigger number of NGOs.
- (11) The framework of the existing women's organisations within the government has been improved to meet the needs of the women at the local level. This shows how the groups were successful in putting in place the gender-sensitive tools within state structures.
- (12) The collective assets of the group protected the poor women from coercion in society and from within the family.
- (13) Finally, the message of the book is "If we want to bring change at the grassroots level, policy intervention is not sufficient. The change of attitude among women at all levels is needed."

This is a successful example of one of the largest collaborations between the NGOs and the government in India, and it also seems sustainable as it has survived for six years already. If the SSP had become a large centralised structure, its survival in the present form might have become difficult. If increased access to resources, along with greater role in decision-making, leads to a sustained flow of income, then women can gain more autonomy in their households and their communities. Sustainability of income generation and rise in literacy provide the basis for the empowerment of women. However, there is a need to conduct a follow-up study to see the changes in economic conditions of these women, and also to see whether those efforts are sustainable in the long run.

The study provides interesting guidelines for establishing an effective organisational set-up to improve the life of women in developing countries. However, it would be interesting to know if this set-up can be effective in the urban sector, where the involvement of women in the labour market and the dependence among the different working groups is of another kind. If such a set-up is less effective in the urban areas, then its successful replication in other developing countries, at least in the urban areas, may be doubted.

However, the book is an important addition to the literature on empowerment of women; indeed, a good reference for developing the interlinkage between social and economic conditions as well as improving the public-private partnership. It may be useful to a wider group of readers including economists, sociologists, and anthropologists.

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