

SHGs AND MID-DAY MEAL SCHEMES: A PATHWAY FOR CONVERGENCE OF WELFARE PROGRAMS

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ABSTRACT

In this study we are interested in finding out the impact of convergence programmes on the effectiveness and functionings of the SHGs. We are also interested in exploring the impact of SHGs on removing and perpetuating caste-based barriers in social life. We finally get the result that most SHGs not only have the power to change the existing inequalities and exercise their agency towards it but they also have the power to maintain a certain status quo which is oppressive and creates inequalities. It is also evident that not all SHGs are efficient in their functioning which could have adverse impact on the welfare programs. Timely intervention and follow up on the activities of SHGs can make them more efficient.

Keywords: SHGs, MDMGs

INTRODUCTION

It has been widely recognized by various scholars that women SHGs require means of livelihoods that may increase their level of income and over all wellbeing of the household. The government through its various welfare schemes have targeted the rural poor by organizing them in groups based on the principles of self-help. SHGs in the past few years have become an important tool for empowering women in developing countries.

Poverty Alleviation Programs (PAPs) and SHGs

The SHG movement in India began with the promise of eradicating poverty by giving out loans to the women members who would invest in their livelihoods. The Integrated Rural Development Program (IRDP) which was one of the largest credit led programs in India provided credit on a subsidized rate. Under this program, the poor were identified through Poverty Line. The 1980s saw coverage of poor families under this scheme. But the impact of the program brought out very contrasting results. It was found out that IRDP was unable to provide required outreach and felt short on its coverage (Dave, 2008). IRDP was later restructured as the Swarnajayanti Gram Swarajgar Yojana (SGSY) which is currently known as National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM). The welfare programmes of the government are funded by the NABARD whose agenda was to make financial sector as pro poor in order to achieve inclusive growth. In order to achieve poverty alleviation, one of the main aims of SHGs was to provide sources of livelihood to the poor women. The current NRLM program is aimed at providing alternative sources of livelihood through self-employment. Hence NRLM is known as a self-employment PAP.

Efforts to provide Livelihoods to SHGs

NRLM was built on the fact that practitioners over the years realized that credit along with a range of services would be able to improve the standard of living of the rural poor over a period of time. This meant providing skill training to the SHG members in order to train them towards specialization of a particular product. But there have been various problems in the implementation of such skill trainings. Some of the problems of livelihood included lack of economies of scale in production, inconsistency in identifying the markets, absence of marketing strategy and business plans and lack of business-oriented mindset were problems faced by the SHGs. (Kashyap, 2008)

Evolution of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS)

There is a significant impact of health status on a child's development and her educational opportunities. A mal-nourished child may fall sick very often and that would result in her absence from the school and her overall performance in the school which might lead to eventual drop out (World Education Forum, 2000). Since the problem of under nourishment is multi-dimensional and inter-generational in nature, the government of India introduced MDMS. MDMS was launched in India in the 1960s and involves provision of free meals to the school children. In 1925, an MDMS was launched for children with a weaker socio economic background in Madras Municipal Corporation. By 1990-91 the number of states who implemented the MDMS increased to twelve and today MDMS feeds about 12 crore children and has become the largest school feeding program in the world. (Kainth, 2013)

However, the implementation of the MDMS was faulty and led to deaths of 23 children under the age of 10 years in Saran district of Bihar in 2013. This was due to the cooking oil that was rumoured to have insecticides that was used to prepare food for children. This enabled the then PM Dr Manmohan Singh, to announce a convergence between two welfare programs of the government. Dr. Manmohan Singh gave the responsibility of preparing school meals to the local SHGs as he thought that this would enable them to earn a decent livelihood while the children would be able to eat nutritious and delicious food.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study is dedicated to

1. Exploring the efficiency of SHGs and their involvement in participating in MDMS.
2. The impact of MDMS in removing caste-based oppression.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The study utilizes qualitative data from secondary sources. It relies heavily on secondary sources like newspaper articles, clippings and reports of MDMS by states.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to (NABARD, 2006) microfinance is the provision of credit and other financial services at low cost to the poor and the destitute to enhance their living in urban, rural and semi-urban areas.

(Puzahendi and Badyata, 2002) claimed that the incomes of women after joining the SHG programme has increased and this has led to an increase in the employment opportunities which has led to social empowerment.

(Rajgopalan, 2005) highlighted that there was a significant change in the self-confidence, mobility access to credit, improved wellbeing at home and at community level and a greater rate of savings.

Group based microfinance programs have become a significant part of the policy of the government. The government has ensured provision of credit plus activities for these programmes in order to provide them low cost banking services along with social services. (Nair, 2005) (Satish, 2005)

(Brahmachary, 2014) highlights the fact that livelihood security is the basic right of every person. There is a study by (Kabeer, 2001) which talks about resources, agency and achievements. In his study on SHG bank linkage program in West Bengal, Brahmachary highlights how security is linked to these three criteria and proposes three domains of security namely income security, social security and voice representational security. The study constructs an index of security to examine the extent of security existing between SHG members and non-participants. The study highlights that components like access to social security and access to alternative livelihood have lower scores in the index. Hence there is a lesser chance for SHG participants to find alternative livelihoods.

The above literature review highlights the fact that there is clearly a missing domain in terms of access to alternative livelihoods in the government welfare programs. Thus it is important to explore livelihoods by way of convergence ie a combination of different welfare schemes. In this study we are going to highlight the convergence of SHGs of SBLP program of the government with the MDMS of various states by taking secondary case studies.

CASE STUDY OF HARYANA

In 2010, the Haryana government decided to give the responsibility of food preparation and distribution to the SHGs in Haryana due to the lower quality of food provided to the students under the MDMS. Previously, the role of teachers in schools was not limited to teaching but also included cooking for the school kids. This took ample of the time of teachers and affected the class performance. There was a complaint from the students as well as the teachers that they do not find time to complete the curriculum. There were also complaints regarding the punctuality of food serving. The students complained that the food was not served on time.

The central government intervened in the efficient delivery of the MDMS and provided one cook per 25 students and another cook for every additional 100 students thereby giving the SHGs a salary of Rs 1000. The government provisioned for the food and was prepared to bear 75% of the total cost of food. In primary classes, the cost of food per student was Rs 2.50 per child and Rs 3.75 per child in middle school.

Since the Haryana government had increased its expenditure on the quantity of vegetables it purchased, the provision of food by the SHGs was supposed to be more nutritional and beneficial for the students. The quality of foods increased and the food was served on time too.

CASE STUDY OF MADHYA PRADESH

In the Batiagarh Village of the Damoh district in MP, a Dalit women SHG named Dalit Vanchit Vikas Manch, raised its objections against the unfair treatment of Dalit children in the school. In the school, Dalit children were forced to wash their own utensils by themselves because the cooks were women from upper caste. Children from dominant castes refused to eat food cooked by lower caste women. The women who cooked food belonged to upper caste households and kept separate utensils to feed the lower children. Lower caste children were asked to bring separate plates and were served food by maintaining distance such that the food was literally thrown to them. There was an attempt by the cooks to ensure that the ladles did not touch the plates of lower caste children.

Not only was there an existence of untouchability but there were major issues with the food in the school. There were complaints from children of low-quality food being served to them. Children were fed watery dal (pulses), vegetables were barely cooked and the rotis (breads) were either burned or under-cooked. There were also instances of corruption amongst the school as the decided menu wasn't served to the children. The ICDS had planned to serve children sweet dish and fruits but they were hardly there.

Regular abuse of children was a common thing by the servers and very often lower caste children were asked to sit away from upper castes. This infuriated the local Dalit SHG and they decided to intervene by asking the authorities to check the status of the food in the school. The block development officer was called to the school and was shown the quality of food that was being served in the school. The block development officer wasn't aware of the existing situation and upon learning about the situation, ordered for a report of the school from the education department. After a couple of days higher authorities like SDM and tehsildar visited the school and conducted an enquiry to inspect the working of the school.

The SDM tasted the food and had meal with the children and was aghast at the quality of the food being served to the children. The immediate response to this was improvement in the quality of food of the school and improvement was also witnessed in the personal communications between the lower caste children and the upper caste authorities. Children were no more addressed in derogatory languages neither were false words used to address them. There was no discrimination on the basis of having separate plates for students and they did not have to either bring their own or wash their own utensils. (PACS India, 2014)

CONCLUSION

The above two cases highlight the efficiency of SHGs in providing quality food to the children and also in challenging social inequalities based on caste. It is also to be noted how SHGs are also the ones who were oppressing the children as the cooks who served meals belonged to an upper caste SHG. This has the following implications:

1. SHGs not only have the power to change the existing inequalities and exercise their agency towards it but they also have the power to maintain a certain status quo which is oppressive and creates inequalities.
2. In the first case, we saw how there was timely delivery of food to the schools and there was an increase in the quality of the food too. However, in the second case we can see how SHGs have been inefficient and were also responsible in siphoning off school supplies by hoarding essential food items. This led to a decrease in quality of food and an increase in corruption.

It is therefore required to check the functioning of the SHGs from time to time. Even the most sought after SHGs can be discriminatory towards each other on basis of social identity like caste and religion. It is also evident that not all SHGs are efficient in their functioning which could have adverse impact on the welfare programs. Timely intervention and follow up on the activities of SHGs can make them more efficient.

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