

JYOTI SANGH: TRAINING FOR SELF-RELIANCE (AHMEDABAD, GUJARAT)

INTRODUCTION

One of the major forces which led to the awakening of women and inspired them to play a significant role in the political, economic and social development of the country was the call from Mahatma Gandhi to participate in the freedom movement in the late twenties and thirties of this century. Gandhiji believed that the country could not progress unless the women, who formed half the population of the country, were educated, were emancipated from poverty, casteism and narrow conservatism, and gained economic independence to strengthen their self-confidence. His was a tremendous effort to create among the people of the country an awareness for the need to respect every woman as an individual whose dignity had to be upheld.

Imbued with this spirit and charged with the tremendous motivation that Gandhiji generated, a large number of women's groups both in the cities and the villages sprang up and developed through the years. The basic direction of these groups was provided by the Gandhian philosophy of service to society, self-sacrifice, a feeling of brotherhood irrespective of caste, creed or language, and a belief in simplicity based on the ideal of plain living and high thinking. The years 1930 to 1947 could be described as an era of great awakening amongst women and the recognition of human rights in the history of this country. During this period a large number of women participated in the freedom movement and fought shoulder to shoulder with men by suffering atrocities and long spells of imprisonment. These were women with family responsibilities who came from all walks of life - the rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated, the old and the young, from all castes and religions. With all these differences they had one thing in common: untiring zeal, great dedication and selfless devotion to the cause of freedom and the emancipation of women.

During this period a number of small organisations came into being. These organisations were engaged in different types of activities such as social service to the needy through health programmes, educational programmes, skill training for women through spinning and weaving. Each organisation concentrated on different facets of these various socially useful activities according to the capabilities and skills of its members and the need of the area in which they worked. Hundreds of such organisations run by women grew up, sometimes with the initiative of the grassroot-level workers in the villages and sometimes with the social workers from urban areas.

GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF JYOTI SANGH

One such organisation which has made a major contribution to raising the quality of life of women through non-formal education programmes is the Jyoti Sangh of Ahmedabad in Gujarat in Western India.

Ahmedabad is the capital city of Gujarat, situated on the River Sabarmati and with more than a hundred textile mills, is the textile centre of India. Mahatma Gandhi established a famous Sabarmati Ashram in this city

where he lived and worked for the freedom of the country. For this reason, Ahmedabad was always in the forefront of the struggle for Independence. A number of voluntary organisations started functioning in which dedicated men and women worked for the social amelioration programme outlined by Gandhiji.

The Jyoti Sangh was established on 24 April 1934 by Smt. Mridulaben Sarabhai and others under the inspiring leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. On 29 June 1934 this organisation was officially inaugurated in a very simple manner by Mahatma Gandhi who in his inaugural message said, "Jyoti means light. Just as one candle can light another, may the efforts of the members give light to the whole society. Go to the poor and spread light in their homes." With humble beginnings the Jyoti Sangh started functioning from the homes of some of its active workers. It has to its credit about 50 years of continuous social service and has provided educational and training facilities for women of all ages.

Since Ahmedabad was an industrial city, it had a large labour population of men and women. Women were exploited as in most parts of the country and were illiterate and needed not only economic support but also education and health services. In the earlier years, the members of the Jyoti Sangh concentrated their attention on creating an awareness among the people to remove injustices against working women and demanded equal pay for equal work for women.

The Jyoti Sangh received both financial and intellectual support from a number of forward looking and progressive men of the time including lawyers, industrialists, educationists, doctors and prominent social workers.

The four main objectives of this organisation are:

- to develop self-confidence and self-reliance in women; to make them fearless citizens; to develop their physical, mental, intellectual and industrial capabilities;
- to promote the feelings of national integrity, fraternity and secularism, and to remove the differences in castes and creeds and thus make women courageous;
- to enable women to come out of the four walls of their homes and take an active part in building up the nation, working shoulder to shoulder with men in the advancement of the nation;
- to fight age-old traditions and orthodox customs which are derogatory to women and hamper their progress.

The activities of the Jyoti Sangh were guided by an executive committee elected by its members. The following three divisions were set up by the Jyoti Sangh to look after its various activities: the Management Division, the Rahat (rescue and relief) Division and the Education and Training Division.

Management Division and its Activities

This division was set up to coordinate with and study the tools and techniques employed by other social organisations of Ahmedabad and Gujarat, to conduct seminars, conferences etc., and by doing so, to mobilise public opinion and bring about a change in social attitudes, to carry out relief work at times of natural calamities and to provide consumer protection. Its activities include the following.

Family Welfare

Under this section Jyoti Sangh conducts four main activities:

1. Child-care centres and creches: between 1947 and 1980 more than 700 children have taken advantage of this facility.
2. A training centre for mentally retarded girls with an annual intake of forty girls.
3. Family planning centres: about 70,000 persons in the Kalupur Centre and Rajpur Centre have been given assistance in this programme in various ways.
4. City family welfare centres and social welfare activities in slum areas have placed 1446 children in the *balwadis* (kindergartens) and 2382 women have been enrolled in hobby classes. The hobby classes were specially meant for women who had minimal education or were illiterate.

Production and Sales

For women who were not capable of having any other training and who needed to earn their own living, a new programme of supplying snacks from the kitchen to different institutions, clubs and families was undertaken. In this department 175 persons are supplied daily with fresh snacks.

The Jyoti Production Centre gives remuneration to about 300 women who are employed in production work in the supply of necessary commodities to hospitals, institutions, and government and semi-government organisations.

Jyoti Sangh Consumers Cooperative Stores sell raw materials for embroidery and tailoring and also take orders from customers which are passed on to the needy women. It helps them to earn their livelihood.

The special and unique feature of all these activities of Jyoti Sangh is that it insists on maintaining the quality of all the products, including food products, prepared in its different divisions. No product of Jyoti Sangh is put for sale in the market unless it is passed by the standards committee. The sale of these products is made through various outlets like Jyoti Vastu Bhandar, Khadya Bhandar, Jyoti Consumers Cooperative Store, etc.

Employment Exchange

Jyoti Sangh Employment Exchange sends about 250 women for catering to dinner parties for which these women are specially trained. It also gives employment to women who are trained in different handicrafts as well as arranging for placements for jobs in private homes, social welfare organisations, nursing, etc.

Jyoti Sangh Employment Exchange publishes a quarterly *Jyoti Sangh Patrika* which keeps its members informed about the job opportunities available as well as the activities of the Sangh.

Apart from these major activities, there are many other short-term activities organised by the Jyoti Sangh. Prominent among these are classes for cultural uplift including visits to historical places and to various educational and cultural institutions. There are classes for cooking, yoga, and food and nutrition. Last but not least, libraries are set up which cater not only for the educated women but also for the neo-literate women.

In order to expose the women to the latest trends in education, the arts and the social and political scene in the country, a series of lectures by prominent speakers was organised by the Jyoti Sangh. Their purpose was to focus the attention of women on subjects such as the legal and political status of women, the position of women in the home, rural women in development child care and modern scientific technology.

Rahat (Rescue and Relief) Division

Social discord, intolerance, economic problems, superstition and outmoded customs lead to social problems. Not only in Gujarat, but all over the country, the Sangh has earned a reputation for trying to eradicate these. The Division tries to see that women get a respected position in society, to make them independent persons contributing to the shaping of the nation's destiny and leading it towards prosperity.

Since its inception the Division has been receiving about 2500 to 3000 cases a year on different problems. Nearly all cases are settled through compromises. Some cases have perforce to be given up, whereas in about 5 per cent of cases the Division has to resort to legal measures. A sub-section of this Division is the family counselling centre which deals with cases requiring psychological help and understanding.

TABLE 1

Some of the Cases Brought to the Rescue Department for Help

<i>Type of case</i>	<i>In 1979-80</i>	<i>From 1937 to 1979</i>
Family feuds	780	24114
Beating and assault	143	8688
Divorce	59	2218
Bigamy	28	1268
Miscellaneous	78	4830
Child marriage	1	2936
Running away from the house	4	809
Kept women (concubines)	20	772
Prostitution	3	899
Maintenance	1	237
Desertion	2	511
Total	1119	48360

Various methods are adopted for solving these cases through compromise, offering legal aid, getting police help, assisting in obtaining divorce, coordinating with other institutions, sending them to *Vikasgrah* (rescue homes). Every month more than 100 women take advantage of Rahat Division for solving their problems.

Education and Training Division

This Division provides facilities to women to enable them to read and write, to keep accounts and be well informed about the world at large. The Division teaches them at least one craft to earn their living and to stand on their own feet. Women from Ahmedabad and other neighbouring villages avail themselves of the services of this Division and about 800 to 1000 women are trained every year. In nearly every village of Gujarat one finds a woman trained by Jyoti Sangh. To date more than 25,000 women have been trained in this Division.

The educational activities of the Jyoti Sangh were in the beginning concentrated on adult education. Adult education did not just end in the teaching of the "three R's". It tried various means of training neo-literate women so that they could be of financial help to their families and, if need be, economically independent. They were taught to make clay toys, envelopes and files, to weave and to make spices used in cooking, etc. The Sangh also helped them to sell these products by contacting different traders or families who used these products regularly. A new step in this direction was to train a band of women in catering for big formal dinners. In addition to the non-formal element of education, the Jyoti Sangh also provides schooling from pre-primary through to high school. Jyoti Sangh today runs special classes for learning English and for training in social work. In the fine arts section, courses are offered in drawing, leather work, framework, batik, hand printing, cane work and toy making. The music section of the Sangh gives training in classical vocal music, instrumental music and light music. Students sit the Certificate examinations of the Gandharva Mahavidyalaya of Ahmedabad and the J.J.School of Arts in Bombay.

A number of classes are organised in fine arts and music. Jyoti Sangh also conducts classes in sewing, embroidery and fancy work, Gujarati and English typing and shorthand and accounts for secretarial work, and spinning and weaving. The training is recognised by well known institutions like the Indian Merchants' Chamber. Stipends are provided for women in need of support. For the various training programmes, the Jyoti Sangh has been fortunate in having dedicated and devoted teachers who have distinguished themselves in public and political life.

Women are taught how to use and look after modern household equipment in classes. In addition, child care, food and nutrition, dietetics, elementary embroidery and the treatment of common ills are taught in these classes. Women are also given training in hand and machine knitting. A well stocked library is provided by the Jyoti Sangh to help its members. The organisation gives awards and honours to women who have spent their lives in living up to the ideals of social service inspired by Mahatma Gandhi.

AN EVALUATION OF JYOTI SANGH'S WORK AND ITS IMPACT

In the beginning the organisation had to face opposition from vested interests, society, government, and women themselves. But slowly women began to come to the organisation and join in its activities. In acknowledgement of the good work done by Jyoti Sangh for the people and the nation, it has received the guidance and assistance of Gandhiji, Pandit Nehru and Sardar Patel.

In the formative years, at the time of the struggle for Independence, devoted women from well known elite families participated and took the initiative. This cleared the way for women from middle-class backgrounds.

From 1934 to 1980 the Jyoti Sangh has tackled various social problems. Sex discrimination still prevails in the treatment of boys and girls, and of men and women. There is also an unwelcome amount of child marriage and sale of brides or bridegrooms. In continuing its attack on these, Jyoti Sangh has adopted a revolutionary attitude, and as a result women are now more alive to these problems of social injustice.

Together with creating awareness the organisation has given non-formal education and skill training which has succeeded in making a number of women self-reliant, self-sufficient and self-confident. As a result, women have been elected to the municipality and Parliament and have held key positions in social and political life.

Finance and Management

In the early days the organisation faced great economic problems. Even a meagre sum of Rs.10 or 15 paid to the voluntary workers could not be found easily. Though funds were minimal, the devoted group of willing workers made it possible for the Jyoti Sangh to carry on the work of the organisation.

Since Independence the central and state social welfare boards' grants have made it possible to carry on the work and gradually expand its activities.

The organisation is managed by women who are educated and experienced. Its executive committee has a majority of women members. Today about 100 honorary workers give their time and energy to the Sangh. A chart detailing the activities of the Sangh is appended.

Future Plans

A special training programme for rescue work is envisaged in the near future. It is planned to organise this work through a number of camps in different parts of Gujarat. Some of the burning problems which come in the way of women's programmes, such as dowries and child marriages, are to be tackled by the Jyoti Sangh in the near future.

A plan is under way to help women to set up small-scale industries by building an estate for small-scale industries for them.

It is intended to undertake the preparation of audio-visual materials and to present one-act plays and puppet shows to bring home effectively important messages for the betterment of rural women.

The Sangh proposes to undertake research on various problems concerning women and make an impact study of the work it has done for the last 50 years.

CONCLUSION

To meet the demand of thousands of women, the Jyoti Sangh is planning to open more centres in the city of Ahmedabad as well as in the State. The unique feature of the Jyoti Sangh is that it has not stagnated into a rigid traditional organisation with limited vision. It has contributed effectively to the all-round development of women and has added new dimensions to its activities over the years.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ACTIVITIES OF JYOTI SANGH THROUGH THE YEARS

