

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON THE AWARENESS LEVELS OF THE BENEFICIARIES OF ASMITA YOJANA IN PALGHAR REGION OF MAHARASHTRA.

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Abstract : The government schemes or yojanas are launched by much fanfare by the government officials. However, it remains to be seen that their benefits are availed by the people they are meant for. The government disseminates information regarding the schemes depending upon communication objectives, audience segmentation, and approaches to be adopted for achieving those objectives and using appropriate communication channels for disseminating information. The paper is an exploration into the awareness levels of the Asmita Yojana amongst the beneficiaries of the yojana. The researcher has done a study regarding the awareness levels of the yojana amongst the girl students, their parents & teachers for whom this scheme is launched. A survey questionnaire was administered to the sample and data

I. INTRODUCTION

The Government disseminates information but it is the opposite of dialogue. Communication is interactive, reciprocal & exchange oriented in nature in nature but dissemination is haphazard, unplanned, one way & unequal dispersion of information. Dissemination shies away from dedicatedly communicating with the masses. They are supposed to be able to spread messages across a wide range of people, and to ensure that those messages will be heard and understood by more than just one person. Imar & de Vries(2012) are of the view that dissemination is majorly receiver-oriented, and because the onus is on the receiver to decode the information she has acquired, this leaves all the more room for multiple interpretations. This does not necessarily mean that messages do not come across, because compared to dialogue more people will concurrently receive a message (which virtually guarantees that someone will understand what that message entails), and it might not even be imperative to derive a single meaning from what was communicated¹.

This research paper will explore the awareness levels regarding the Asmita Yojana amongst the beneficiaries and the parents & the teachers of the girl students of the said scheme which is aimed towards empowering girls & young women in Maharashtra. The survey was done on a sample of three Zilla Parishad schools in the Palghar district of Maharashtra.

Review of literature: The review of literature was related to the problem statement and focused on the following areas: The process of communication, role of mass media in communication and the various strategies implemented in health communication.

The review of literature raised important questions regarding the public being aware of such yojanas, the role of communication plays in the implementation of such schemes in India.

Li (2005) mentions lot of the schemes get bureaucratized and too centralised in their techniques. He says the concept of governmentality focuses on population and their empowerment...But it must be judged by its yield...it provokes us to ask how particular government programs are devised, the techniques they assemble.²

Javid A. Chowdhary(2004) puts forth that India is still a developing country, desperately scrambling around for fulfilling its basic human needs. Yet our country is the one that has virtually no social security net for most of the population...The schemes that have been envisaged, would take at least a decade or two to be established before their benefits can be rightly availed by those most in need...bringing in a mix of providers, including private and private-not-for-profit entities, offers a more feasible arrangement.³

Communication thus plays an indispensable role in the delivery and manifestation of health goals. According to Healthy People 2010 guidelines, health communication includes the research on and implementation of communication strategies to inform and influence individual and community decisions that enhance health. Health communication can lead to conditions of disease prevention & promotion of better health. Research shows that effective communication can lead to an improvement in interpersonal and group interactions. Health related public service announcements have traditionally been made on hoardings, radio, television & print such as pamphlets & newspapers. Campaigns have also been done through community based programs.

Schiavo (2013) articulates the meaning of communication strategies specifically related to health as a statement describing the overall approach used to accomplish communication objectives...Health communication strategies must be designed in a way that they respond to an actual need that has been identified by preliminary research and confirmed by the intended audience. There is direct proportionality between the participation of the communities and their influencers and success of communication efforts and eventually attaining those objectives. Engaging communities and different sectors is often accomplished in health communication practice by working together with organizations and leaders who represent them or by directly involving members of a specific community at the outset of program design.⁴

It is thus very timely, imperative & important to check the process of dissemination itself, whether it has translated into the practice and eventually benefited the targeted beneficiaries. The study looks into the substantive manifestation of the ideals and the basic tenets of communication such as whether communication is resulting in the transmission of ideas, thoughts, feelings, behaviour from one person to another, whether communication is effectual and is seeking and eventually resulting in desirable response to information and messages being transmitted, since communication is a two way process, both vertically and horizontally culminating in 'give and take' or 'send and receive'.

Objectives of the Study: The study strives to understand the level of awareness amongst the beneficiaries of Asmita Yojana in the Palghar district of Maharashtra. This research will explore whether government schemes are communicated to the target audience, in particular Asmita Yojana which is one of several schemes launched by the government for empowerment of girls & young women. The study deals with communication strategies employed and whether they reach their intended beneficiaries. Asmita Yojana is aimed towards empowering young girls and women by providing them good quality sanitary pads at a subsidised rate.

In India, Health Communication has not proven to be effective in influencing individuals and the community. Health Communication that seeks to influence and engage about menstrual health isn't socially accepted yet and is often not talked about. Menstrual education is an important part of health communication because attitudes towards menstruation and menstrual practices developed at menarche will persist throughout the life.

When seen in the Indian context, mass-media seem to function in a manner as if development communication is a favour they are doing to common people. Development communication sadly is not given its due importance to a large and developing country like India. Politicians and bureaucrats still believe that different economical and infrastructural projects under taken by the government is enough to eradicate poverty. Development communicator of our country laid more stress on the projects undertaken by the government rather than communicating these information to the masses (Choudhary, Payel Sen, 2011)⁵

Introduction to Asmita Yojana

The following information was provided to the researcher by Mrs. R. Vimala, CEO, MSRLM, Govt. of Maharashtra via email-

Asmita Yojana, an initiative by the government of Maharashtra, was launched on the occasion of International Women's Day on Thursday, 8th March, 2018. Maharashtra government kick- started its nation-wide Ashmita Yojana under which sanitary napkins – the basic women necessity will be provided to women of the state at a discounted price.

Rural school girls can avail sanitary napkin packet for just Rs. 5 while rural women can get it at a subsidised rate of ₹ 24 and ₹ 29. All school girls will be provided with 'ASMITA Card' for instant purchase of the napkins.

YES BANK is digitizing the entire subsidy distribution process through ASMITA App. They claim to have 2 crore direct beneficiaries of the digitization drive including Zilla Parishad school girls aged between 11 & 19 years old. ASMITA App is available for SHGs to purchase napkins in bulk and pay through the integrated wallet. Maharashtra is the first State in India to completely digitize subsidy disbursement aimed at promoting menstrual hygiene management Digital process aimed at increasing napkin usage from 17% to 75% in Maharashtra. Asmita app size varies from device to device and can be installed on any Android device running version 4.0.3 and up.

Now people can make their contribution towards this good cause and become an Asmita Sponsor. To become an Online Sponsor, people must sponsor at least one girl child for an year. Thus Minimum Sponsoring Amount is $12 * 15.20 = \text{Rs. } 182.40$ per annum. As on 28th January, 2019 a total of 28,185 women SHGs have registered under this scheme and are benefitting from it. This is an additional livelihood opportunity for them by engaging themselves in sale of ASMITA sanitary napkins. Also, 12,845 number of school girls studying in Zilla Parishad Schools across Maharashtra have purchased 240 mm subsidized ASMITA sanitary napkins through the registered SHG members by using ASMITA card. Additionally, 62,984 number of sanitary napkins (280 mm) have been sold to women across villages in Maharashtra and 93,536 number of 240 mm non-subsidized ASMITA sanitary napkins have been sold to non ZP adolescent girls across rural Maharashtra. All the Zilla Parishad Schools located in all the districts are covered under this Yojana. The target beneficiaries are school girls aged 11-19 years.

The district under study : About Palghar



(palghar.gov.in)

Palghar is a town in the Konkan division of Maharashtra and lies on the western line of the Mumbai Suburban Railway. The district comprises of 8 talukas, namely Makhada, Talasari, Vasai, Vikramgad, Jawhar, Palghar, Dahanu and Wada.⁶

Zilla Parishad Schools

On the official website of Zilla Parishad schools a total of 3229 schools were listed according to their latest report of 2015-2016 in the state of Maharashtra.

Research Methodology: The study is exploratory in nature and the sample was non-probable, purposive & convenient. For this study, 80 girl students aged from 11-19 years who are beneficiaries of the Asmita Yojana and studying in Zilla Parishad Schools in Palghar district including secondary schools, Secondary with higher secondary, Higher secondary only, Upper primary with secondary and Primary with secondary were chosen. 60 parents, teachers & headmasters in all were administered the questionnaire.

Data Collection: The researcher purposely chose the ZP schools from the list which were at least upto class V & either Co-educational or Girls only. Primary data was collected employing method of survey using a questionnaire for the beneficiaries of the yojana. To begin with, a list of the Zilla Parishad schools was taken from the list of blocks of Palghar District. Palghar, a district of Maharashtra is having 8 Blocks in its district. All the schools in the District are divided into different blocks. The researcher used a survey questionnaire in order to conduct the study.

The five schools were:

- ZP School, Palghar no. 1 Marathi
- ZP School Palghar no.1 Gujarati
- ZP School, Urdu School, Palghar
- ZP School, Navali
- ZP School, Vevur.

Survey Questionnaire: The questionnaire aimed at gaining information regarding the awareness of the scheme, the medium or media through which they heard about it, if they were aware what it was about, if they could recollect any advertisements related to it, which medium or media they would prefer to know more about it, if the benefits of the scheme are easy to avail & if the process to avail could have been simpler.

Data Analysis: A simple look at the both the data sets revealed the following.

Through the analysis of the student beneficiaries' questionnaire, the researcher came to the following conclusions:

- All the beneficiaries of the scheme are aware of it & have the cards made.
- 70 out of 80 beneficiaries came to know about it through a social worker. 10 came to know about it through posters & publicity materials.

- Student beneficiaries would prefer to know more about the scheme through the television.
- All the student beneficiaries could avail of the sanitary napkins distributed by various companies at their schools as part of their CSR activities.

Through the analysis of the parents, teachers & headmasters beneficiaries' questionnaire, the researcher came to the following conclusions:

- All the responders have heard about the scheme & are aware what it is about.
- All are aware about the benefits offered by the scheme.
- 50 out of the 60 responders would prefer detailed information on it through the newspapers or print material.
- All responders would actively seek information on the scheme if it was better communicated to them.
- All responders are of the opinion that the process is complicated & could have been simpler.
- All responders have shared whatever information they have with other parents, family members & neighbours.

Discussion: Some of the news reports related to the Asmita Yojana are as follows: According to the Loksatta newspaper, one needs to look closely into the lack of public awareness communication lapse in the implementation of the Yojana.⁷

The Hindu newspaper reports that The Asmita Yojana's aim was to get young girls and women use hygienic products but ironical that the villagers don't seem to be aware of the scheme.⁸

An earlier report in The Hindu also mentions that women from Palghar district are yet to benefit and avail from the scheme but the claims made by the officials are on the contrary.⁹

A news report in the Indian Express also talks about improving the quality of the napkins but there doesn't seem to be any initiative on the public officials part to communicate the same to the people.¹⁰

Latest newspaper reports related to the yojana from 2020 reveal that in response to a PIL filed, Maharashtra government Friday informed the Bombay high court that over 1.6 crore sanitary pads have been sold at highly subsidised rates to adolescent girls studying in Zilla Parishad schools and rural women across the state, ever since the Asmita Yojana was introduced in 2018.¹¹

The study clearly reveals that even though beneficiaries are aware of the said scheme and have got the cards made to avail the benefits of the same, a clear communication gap is visible when it comes to them actually availing the benefits. The parents, teachers & headmasters are eager to know more about the scheme and have shared whatever information they have with their family, friends & neighbours. The implementing agencies could convey and disseminate the information using the mass media channels as most responders feel there must be more information in the print as well as the electronic media regarding the scheme.

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