Article: Rethinking Conflict Prevention through Grassroots Activism: Narratives of Women Building Peace in Rural India

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Abstract

The peace-building initiatives adopted by India has been criticised for its lack of engagement with women and their interests despite an assurance to promote gender mainstreaming in conflict prevention. Activists have responded to it in both individual and collective capacities. This paper explores the existing experiences of grassroots peace activism where women have taken the role of transformers in preventing inter-personal conflicts within households and those that lead to neighbourhood and community tensions. It draws on the narratives of a civil society group, Mahila Shanti Sena, based in rural areas – reflecting women’s concerns for everyday episodes of violence and emphasising a close cohesion of action through livelihood, education and empowerment. It argues for the need to widen the scope for the decentralised participatory interventions – contextualising the gender discourse of conflict prevention and peace-building.

Key words: Conflict prevention, Grassroots activism, Peace-building, Rural, Women

Introduction

A recurring gap in India’s peace-building process is about institutionalising women’s involvement in conflict prevention and peace processes. In the recent times, at global forums, India has underscored that women’s involvement is sought not only in the normative form but has an urgent need to initiate capacity-building at the ground level (PTI, 2019). The progress is slow and lacks continuity. Studies have reasoned out that much can be gained from women’s agency and activism and have documented their contributions in the civil society space (Manchanda, 2005; Bhattacharya, 2010). These outputs are primarily discussed about regions that record a history of assertions to insurgency problems than elsewhere. Women’s participation remains under-represented, with much less attention given to peace-building capacities at the village level. Further, a
large amount of resources is considerably directed to address the immediate crisis by demobilising the conflicting actors; whereas, the emphasis is often laid to strategise towards long-term prevention of conflicts and sustainable peace by mobilising the democratic participation of stakeholders.

One of the crucial aims enumerated in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 16 is about enabling peaceful societies, providing justice, and building inclusive institutions; pledges to leave no one behind. The indicator framework discusses reducing all forms of violence, abuse, and exploitation as relevant issues to be addressed (Behar, 2016). The possibility of bridging the prevalent gaps and realising the shift of focus from states controlling conflicts to societies enabling peace needs wider exploration in India’s rural spaces.

The global responsiveness to a broad range of threats and violence has given room for reimagining the scope of conflict prevention. Scholars have argued to look for peace as a lived experience rather than treating it as an abstract political affair and calling for the inclusion of everyday peace in the peace-building objectives (Richmond, 2011; Mac Ginty & Firchow, 2016). Further, they discuss strengthening the bottom-up approach that involves local preventive actions, the inclusion of social and ecological needs of the communities in the peace process, and building the local capacities for reconciliation (Scholten, 2020). Reviere (2007) has found that one of the crucial contributions of women’s involvement in the process of peace-building worldwide has been sharing personal narratives that bring forth issues of conflict that have remained unnoticed. Understanding peace and conflict from a gender perspective is not new. However, the role that women take to voice and act needs broader consideration and is strategically important to anchor their institutional role for bringing into focus the ground narratives.

This paper mainly attempts a two-fold purpose. First is to examine the gender concerns in the contemporary discourse of conflict prevention and peace-building. It broadens the discussion by looking at the bottom-up participatory approach as a method of peace-building, and locating it in the context of India. Discussion on the conceptual aspect is drawn from studying perspectives that involve alternative methods of contextualising conflicts, where the grassroots lens is emphasised. Second, by referring to a case-study of peace activism led by a community action group in the rural areas, the paper draws upon the existing intervention in which women have played a significant role in preventive action. Reflections are gathered from the Women’s Peace Brigade, *Mahila Shanti Sena* (MSS) which has
been working with the rural women. Concerning the stated aims, the authors dwell on the idea that there is immense scope to gather indigenous experiences from states like India, where the concept of grassroots governance is fundamental. Despite inadequacies due to the embedded marginalisation of socially weaker sections, grassroots space can be organically nurtured for communities to realise what threatens their existence.

Although the feminist scholars had been discussing violence against women theorised through the lens of victimisation, it has also started paying attention to the path-breaking experiences where women can transform themselves as agents of change (Motta, Fominaya, Eschle & Cox, 2011). Women may tread ways to empower themselves and others through comradesies to find meanings in the resistance and critically engage with the surrounding (Alvarez, 2019). In this article, we draw upon the personal narratives of women who have taken the role of transformers. By reflecting on the views of the MSS members, the study tries to discuss the nuances of conflicts and meanings of development. By contextualising how women construct and visualise peace from everyday life experience, it tries to capture views where they speak about incorporating their role as change agents. The mobilisation of peace activists on issues confronting rural women’s lives is rarely discussed or seen as side-issues, though the relevance is not unknown. Most of the available literature covers the MSS work in Northeast India, and barely any academic discussion has been written on its other regions of intervention. The emphasis in this paper is to shed light on the rural participation in peace-building with cases drawn from the villages of Odisha. It is a descriptive-analytical work which is primarily based on the secondary sources, supplemented with interviews of MSS activists through the web-based interactions. In the later sections, we will discuss the process of interaction.

The Gender Dimension of Conflict Prevention and Peace-building

Conflict itself, being a mix of variables, does not provide a simple explanation for its occurrence. Aggression is one type of engagement in conflicts, which is often associated with men (Jones & Fabian, 2006). The sanctioned use of aggression and resulting violence may be a means to preserve male dominance, but it is also shaped by class and other social locations. Therefore, feminist scholars challenge the constructions of all simple binaries that were earlier applicable to this subject, including the distinct identity of victims and perpetrators based on the biological divisions. The emphasis is on adopting gender analysis of the experiences of
conflict without losing sight of the vulnerability faced by women (Giles & Hyndman, 2004; Cockburn, 2004).

Structural factors can be an important driver of conflicts and may define how one may experience power relations, access the social environment, exercise rights, and get represented within various institutions, such as market, polity, and community. The segmentation may be replicated in many forms; one of the concerns is gender inequality. The more significant the gender gap in terms of opportunities and outcomes, the higher is the possibility of violence. It has been a constant concern for India that its performance in the gender gap is dismal, including low workforce participation of women. It might take almost a century to narrow and close the gap (PTI, 2019). The socio-economic dependency of women underlines that they face violence that continues to rise (Chauhan, 2019). Cockburn (2001) has mentioned that societies that have faced political violence have often ignored the predisposing conditions. Both economic distress and instances of gender-based violence invigorating patriarchy are equally propounding for major political threats. Therefore, it becomes pertinent to devote attention to the gender dimension of conflict prevention.

Conceptually, conflict prevention began with an emphasis on addressing immediate crises through military sanctions and state operations. Later, as stated in the 2001 Report of the Prevention of Armed Conflict, submitted by the Secretary-General to the United Nations General Assembly, the preventive action aimed ‘to address the deep-rooted socio-economic, cultural, environmental, institutional, and other structural causes that often underlie the immediate political symptoms of conflict’. The prevention paradigm has moved from its ‘earlier toolkit symptomatic approach towards conflict to a more inclusive one that embraces several of the activities associated with conflict transformation practices’ (DasGupta, 2008, p. 23). Practitioners may employ a range of activities that are not restricted to a certain concept. In the contemporary analysis, treating conflict prevention as a separate linear process from conflict resolution, and/or transformation is avoided. They are complementary and, in many ways, are seen as the inseparable aspects of peace-building (Swanström & Weissmann, 2005). A few studies may prefer to use the term transformation rather than resolution. Theoretically, the former channelise ways of transforming relationships and interests, and the later strategise ways to transcend conflicts submitting to peace as the final status (Miall, 2004). However, these are intensely connected as the key is to make people aware of the needs and redefine interests. Particularly,
Burton and Duke’s notion of seeing human dimensions of conflict and not merely about the conditions, and working towards creating cooperative relationships states a juxtaposition of these concepts (Wani, Suwirta & Payeye, 2013).

In the last two decades, post-Beijing Conference on Women (1995), there has been a broader acknowledgment for increased women’s role and access to conflict prevention. The forum had documented one of the essential subjects for consideration was violence against women, which needs to be addressed through gender mainstreaming of all policies (Women Watch). Another landmark resolution that talks about strengthening women’s capacity as central actors in prevention, protection, and participation in adverse situations of conflicts is the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. Its understanding rests on the basic premise of gender equality so that decisions taken encompass women’s rights and views. India is yet to come up with a national action plan on the resolution. This particular resolution is focused on armed conflicts, and therefore there is an aversion of adopting it, as India does not want to draw unnecessary international attention in its ‘disturbed areas’ (Rajagopalan, 2016, p. 2). However, the presence of conflicts in various other forms, such as communal violence, organised crime, caste violence, and domestic violence, also needs determined action plans if one has to respond to the global pledge on peaceful societies.

Despite the constraints of responding to the universal frameworks, women, have been proactively taking part in activism, and leading peace initiatives in India. ‘Peace to them is not just a political phenomenon but also economic and social in nature’ (Banerjee, 2008, p. 215). Such attempts, however, have not been without women’s share of struggles and pitfalls. Ever since the times of the national movement for colonial independence, this part of the world presents examples where women have struggled to demolish the stereotypical images of the division between the private world of family, domesticity, and reproduction, and the public world of production, politics, war, and peace. The majority remained confined by these socially constructed boundaries. For the peasant women, even if they can access the sphere of production, but peace and political activity were out of their reach (Stree Shakti Sangathana, 2008). If one studies the trajectory of Indian women’s activism, it was not challenging patriarchy separately in the public and private spheres. However, while aiming to draw more solidarity in their assertion of rights in the public realm, the women’s movement had to compromise to not come in the way of women’s familial obligations. There were limitations, and the
movement could not fully resist patriarchal norms. In the 1920s, Indian women’s movement entered a new phase with the creation of localised associations that worked on women’s education and livelihood strategies. They possessed a distinct identity blended with the progressive ideas of women’s upliftment in all fronts, including home space. These were led by elite women but remained inclusive of rural women and society (Deka, 2013; Banerjee, 2010; Gangoli, 2006). Within the national debate, local issues were receiving attention, and today these are part of the contemporary globalised narration of peace and development.

Priyabadini (2012) stated that from the late 1980s, women’s movement in Odisha took up several issues related to women’s oppression, violence, family matters and marital injustices for pursuing collective actions. Later, in the 2000s, active grassroots organisations gave a radical turn to the women’s movement by creating space for the inclusions, and mobilisation of the landless and rural women. Though armed conflict had gained considerable attention due to the presence of the Maoist group in Odisha, there are ample gender-based violence cases that need to be prevented. In a study focused on Odisha, women have revealed that they continue to face violence even after returning to peace through the control of the armed conflict. Threats and verbal abuse were among the most widespread violence, and the perpetrators were mostly known to them, belonging to the same village. In some cases, their identity was different from that of the perpetrators who belonged to another tribe, caste, or religion (Adsule, Balakrishnan & Chettiar, 2010).

One of the issues tabled for attention in the NFHS-4, 2015-16, was domestic violence. In Odisha, of the 35 per cent reported facing domestic violence and abuse, only 3 per cent have sought help from the police, and 13 per cent sought other forms of help, and the remaining never told about it. It was found that the most common perpetrator was a male figure. However, cases of female relatives mistreating or subjugating women to violence were not uncommon, positing the need to shed-away the single image of perpetrators (National Family Household Survey [NFHS-4], 2017). Along with the physical violence in the domestic space, perpetration in the form of insults, abuses, and psychological violence is severely present in the state. Women tend to feel the shame, suffer from self-blame and fear the violence, rather than discussing their experiences (Das, 2013). There could be further ignorance of ‘intimate terrorism’, a term coined to understand aggressiveness, coercive control, and intimidation by a partner (Johnson, 2008, p. 25). The culture of patriarchy is endemic; such forms of
violence may be common in Indian households. With less access to the state-level institutions, low levels of reporting, and taboos impinging on social life, the process of identifying household violence can be challenging. It magnifies when any interventions are managed from outside because ‘women are very likely to under-report the actual experience of violence when asked by an unfamiliar person’ (Jejeebhoy, 1998, p. 4). Here, we are trying to understand whether community-based groups committed to peace-building and working on the challenges in the societal structures and societies can be an answer to the prevalent gaps raised above? The women in India cannot come under a universal experience; the specificities are too many to fit in a standardised role. In a bit to address the diversities, the communities in the rural areas need further attention. It is necessary to understand how peace can be built in the grassroots space. An analysis of the method of engagement is discussed in the next section.

The Participatory Approach: A Few Clarifications and the Inquiry Method

A decentralised participatory approach is receiving wider acclaim since the 1990s’ due to its in-built elasticity to prevent and resolve conflicts. Such an approach discusses change through a people-centered method that aims to assess and accommodate the local needs, enhance community dialogues, and carry a sense of cultural sensitivity. Rather than imposing narratives and robbing the people of their agency, such an approach aims to gather local stakeholders’ opinions. Henceforth, the everyday experiences of ordinary people and the inclusion of indigenous systems in peace processes have been gaining ground.

Lederach school of thought had started looking for the potentialities of grassroots in peace-building because it comprises the majority (Paffenholz, 2009). Methods need to be related to the importance and complexity of cultures. Though there could be a certain amount of universality, the resources used and the facilitation can evolve using culture as the foundation (Lederach, 1996). Mac Ginty et al. (2016) discussed using this approach for peace, safety, and social change in their project on everyday peace indicators. The aim was to allow the community’s voices to comprehend conflict and identify the localised definition of peace. The bottom-up community-based peace-building approach can make a difference in the quality of peace apropos the top-down processes where implementation is often determined by the mainstream leadership that could be overbearing and ill-informed (Reed & Del Ceno, 2015).
The top-down approach may have a typical outlining that imposes the imaginaries in which values are not representative of the collective lives of the surroundings. Some studies have discussed that social imaginaries can be a key point of engagement with the communities to understand the context of violence and unfold the people-focused space that will make the transition from conflict or prevent it (Page & Sosa, 2019). Without (shared) narratives of the past, aspirations, sense of responsibility, and exchanges of views, leaders may not succeed in overcoming deep social dissensus of the communities (Stephenson Jr., 2011). The participatory approach is read to be more relevant to come close to the textures of imaginaries. However, scholars are not arguing for dismissing any specific approach. Rather, it discusses the alternative method as complementary, where efforts will be made to gauge a spectrum of views (Mac Ginty et al., 2016).

The concept of local is often referred to as a village or community level interaction. However, the strong compartmentalisation of the local from other national and global spaces may be a false dichotomy because there are overlaps. Local, when suggested instead of national peace-building, may be understood in terms of implementation rather than their inception confining to an area of sub-national level (Hauge, Doucet & Gilles, 2015; Hellmüller, 2018). There is a need to bring the historical sense and not begin only with the intervention itself and allow, wherever possible, the interaction of local with other spaces to evolve (Hellmüller, 2018; Mac Ginty, 2011). Critiques have underlined that the bottom-up approach might also suffer from setbacks of individualist purposes. Its depoliticised nature is a myth as even the local involvement can rarely be free from social and political constraints (Lefranc, 2011). There could be a tendency to romanticise or essentialise the local, customary, and traditional as an inclusive decision-making space carrying a homogeneous entity. The political detachments and a sense of homogeneity were found in the activist language of the MSS.

The above discussed participatory approach was examined at a micro-level. By focusing on the MSS and the women who are associated with it, it is understood that the grassroots rural setting is both the home and the field for the members. They aim to accomplish changes in villages. Looking at the limitations of defining the local, where a sharp separation with other spaces and with broader socio-economic contexts is difficult to observe, it justifies that we use of term ‘grassroots’ rather than local in this study. The MSS brings academicians and villagers together who work on peace, non-violence, development, and democracy, and with women at the centre. The brigade evolved as a hope that
Indian women can emerge as a creative social force for creating a new culture of peace (Singh, 2012). The first Sabha meeting saw an attendance of around a hundred women, and subsequently, MSS meetings led to a further increase in the number of its followers and activists. It has been primarily active in Bihar, Assam, and Odisha, though it has a presence in a few other Indian states. The rural areas of eastern India had been the seedbed of the movement. However, it has hardly acquired popular attention, unlike many other women’s peace groups. Few relevant discussions need a mention.

Chaudhury (2016) discusses the MSS women’s peace activism in rural Assam and shares the members’ narratives whose lives have seen transformation after associating with the movement. There are success stories where MSS members had persuaded their family members who were directly involved in internal conflicts to explore livelihood options. And, there are also examples where they could create cooperation among different ethnicities in the neighbourhood. Through its ‘preventive, mitigative, and adaptive methods’, MSS tries to address the issues of a plural society (ibid., p. 124). Carrying a model of conflict prevention and transformation, the MSS activists have used self-evolved methods to initiate change in the community while negotiating with the incidences of violence. Similarly, Banerjee (2014) notes the active role of MSS in counter-insurgency sensitisation in Tripura. The Sena activists in villages used the forum to negotiate peace and adopted livelihood generation strategies to further the cause.

To cover a more inclusive discussion of its various units, one of the ways that MSS tries to communicate about its work is by publishing newsletters from time to time. In most of these writings, contributions of social activists who have inspired the MSS thinking combined with reflections on the community-level strategies for empowerment are highlighted. The approach to peace, conflict prevention, gender, and social justice could be gathered through these newsletters. The discourses for action revolve around resisting patriarchy, ending poverty, domestic violence, family tensions, and conflicts at the community level, which they consider are most detrimental to progress. The MSS has often discussed the lack of formal education and concerns about the physical and mental health in villages and among its members. One of its prime objectives is to build a peaceful neighbourhood to ensure the upliftment of women, and thereby the community, by using the technique of non-violence (Mohanty, 2018; Singh, 2005). It tries to operationalise its approach by working in smaller groups of dasta (group of
(group of 5), which are village action groups looking at the immediate complications in the vicinity. These groups forge the idea of sisterhood and try to string support of the community against discrimination and violence.

The MSS aims to connect with the issues of violence beyond the rural, as they acknowledge their solidarity with the global and national concerns. But no concerted effort is seen to expand to India’s urban spaces. The declaration of using ‘silent language’ could be at times problematic though they talk of ‘stepping in the bigger courtyard of society’ (Singh, 2005, p. 3); meaning they will never attempt to become revolutionary except for their ideas. The activists’ personal narratives are not accounted for in the MSS writings, though these could have significantly contributed to their committed discourses.

After reviewing the literature, the MSS newsletters, and mapping the intervention areas, the next step was to approach it to participate in the study. Introducing the purpose to the participants and giving open-ended queries, we initiated discussions for sharing their ideas. The definition of conflict and peace was not pre-determined. The MSS members who participated in the research identified issues that they saw relevant in their village or neighbourhood. The study did not aim to test research inquiries by using the sampling method. The scope was laid open to the organisation to gather views from as many activists who intended to participate. One member led the discussion that carried views from a group of around ten members and shared the observations with us. Over-looking the relevance of the number, what is essential is the content-specific component added by the respondents.

The study’s locale was chosen based on an area where activism has been most intense and has a duration of operation of more than ten years, till 2015. Therefore, the presence of the MSS unit in the Indian state of Odisha led by Unnayan, among the marginalised tribal community, served as the second filtering for the survey. It allowed including the voices of women who are the most under-represented in many ways. The study intended to get a participatory lens from the MSS activists, but limitations remain. The responses gathered were mostly in the form of a collective voice, and only a few had separately documented their views. A detailed discussion is carried out in the next segment; the women activists share how the MSS objectives are brought into practice by identifying the problem areas in the villages.
Reflections on the Grassroots Preventive Action: The Odisha Mahila Shanti Sainiks

Initiated by a social activist and a Gandhian, the MSS calls itself as a movement rather than an organisation. It carries the historical discourses of decentralised peace and constructive village-based development. Mahatma Gandhi coined the concept of the grassroots soldiers of peace (Shanti Sena). He had discussed the objectives of raising a band of workers who would maintain peace among people (Weber, 1996). The insight has been revisited by Gandhians, and the MSS serves as a living example in the contemporary times. As a sequel to the 1992 amendment in the Indian Constitution, when the one-third reservation was provided for women in the governance, the MSS planned the Vaishali Sabha, from where the journey began. Aimed towards grassroots peace governance through Panchayati Raj Institutions (village governance bodies) and to revolutionise the accorded passive role of women in governance settings, the MSS members undertake overlapping roles as Panchayat members. R. Singh, an academician and a pioneer of the MSS movement, stated that:

Since we did not want MSS to become an NGO, we refrained from starting it as one; rather we collaborate with existing organisations, citizens groups and individuals. The Unnayan of Odisha is one such example, focusing on income generation and conflict resolution. (personal communication, May 27, 2015).

He also stated that, at times, the movement had faced setbacks, like the intensity became weak in Bihar and they were trying to revive it with some financial help from the state. The personal journeys of the women activists of Odisha are worth documenting. Between 2005 and 2015, more than five thousand women associated themselves with the movement from Angul, Puri, Sambalpur, Mayurbhanj, Balasore, Jagatsinghpur, Nuapada, Kendrapada and Raygada districts of Odisha. The leadership evolves from the team whose aim is to submit to activism. In this study, the documentation is mainly gathered from the Mayurbhanj activists.

When asked, what are the main problems and conflict issues in the villages of Odisha? R. Mohanty (personal communication, July 10, 2015), who has been with Unnayan since 1995 and later became the Secretary of the Odisha wing of MSS, had identified poverty, alcoholism, domestic violence, abuses, and violence
against women as the concerns; other issues are bride-price, gambling, and broken homes. Most of the respondents stated that they see education as an essential catalyst for bringing the change in their communities and countering violence. MSS became a platform for addressing local issues and overcoming distresses in the everyday lives of villages, a primary reason for many to have embraced its membership. They are continually trying to break the stereotypical gender divide by emphasising on transformations during formative years of childhood. Alcoholism among men is a reflection of patriarchal power, and the women’s collective strength has been harnessed for participation in the anti-liquor movement. The Mayurbhanj MSS had taken drastic steps to abolish Mada Bhati (country-made liquor center) in their village.

Realising that individuals’ potentials can come forth only when the basic needs are met, a focused attention is laid on health, safe drinking water, and education (Darshan, 2013). R. Mohanty reiterates the vision of generational change in the quality of life. She has stated:

The MSS members are monitoring their village school as a member of the school management committee for quality education. In the village level, MSS members are also members of different committees like Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH), Village Disaster Management Committee (VDMC), and forest committee. (personal communication, July 10, 2015).

Advocating for girls’ education, motivating common playgroups among boys and girls, raising activism against early marriage and child trafficking are ways in which traditional mind-sets are challenged. There is a consensus in strengthening the pillars of participatory democracy and development through capacity-building activities and raising the level of consciousness of women. It also seeks to empower women economically through schemes of providing micro-loans, self-help groups (SHGs) and skill-based training. The significant participation in the drive was coming from the labourer class.

Among the various incidences of change by the Odisha wing of MSS, the residents of Majhi Sahi, which is part of Jhatiada village in Mayurbhanj, needs a mention. The Majhis were trying to meet their needs through wage labour. Living as landless and socially marginalised, the community members got involved in anti-social activities, and men got addicted to alcoholism. They had to be
dependent on money lenders for survival and emergency needs. The MSS initiated mobilisation of women to form SHGs together with their male counterparts. The initial men’s reluctance and women’s fear to manage SHG were overcome through a continuous persuasion. Later, they extended incremental changes in livelihood, health, education, and water issues of the community. The ousted community found acceptance from neighbouring villages, and a significant behaviour change occurred in the men (Mahila Shanti Sena, 2009). During our interaction, the activists inferred that violence is a by-product of the faulty development process, and building self-reliance through income-generating activities can be a step towards reducing violence.

The MSS trains its members to enact the role of transformers. The meetings use a combination of methods, like that of lectures, discussions, and role-plays. Women share their experiences and insights, and each participant learns from their co-participants. Activists have shared the benefits of the mutual learning process. They stated that the training camp helps them introspect about their responsibility as a leader. It creates an environment where they think beyond themselves. Peace rallies, human chains, and travels across villages are used to draw upon broader connection with their concerns of violence. MSS has been raising corps for a Tatpar Mahila Shanti Sena or the Rapid Action Force, which was created as a response to the understanding that women’s involvement is indispensable at the initial stages of the crisis. The training schedules are not meant to disrupt women’s routine chores, and these training initiatives try to bring forth women-related concerns and those that affect the local policy-level issues. The MSS has tried to ensure that there is not much resistance from the households for their participation (Pearson, 2004). Discussed in the previous section about Indian women’s activism, the nature of MSS engagement is no different. Participation in the action group is open to both men and women, with the focus laid on the conflicts faced by women.

The presence of MSS in some areas may have overshadowed the role of the state agencies. R. Mohanty takes pride in accounting that in Rasagovindapur block of Mayurbhanj district:

*Whenever a problem arises, the local authorities advise people to go to MSS first. In other districts also, police are supporting MSS leaders of the concerned district. Sometimes MSS leaders have to*
convince the police boldly. (personal communication, July 10, 2015).

The work of MSS acts as a supporting role in many state interventions. During elections, they become active in addressing crisis and field their candidates for Panchayat elections. It also acts as a partner to Panchayat, wherever possible, supporting it by monitoring government-induced projects and prepares the beneficiary list for different schemes meant for the people. For creating a more significant social presence, it has conceptually refrained from alignment with political parties. R. Mohanty has stated that:

*During the elections, when political problems arise in the villages level, MSS members play an important role in solving the problem.*

(personal communication, July 10, 2015).

It was not clear, though, how political problems could have been resolved with a completely non-political attitude and a uniform approach. Nonetheless, the MSS’s idea to bridge the gap of people’s power and state power is being attempted by intervening in the space of politics.

Narratives of a few Shanti Sainiks (peace corps), who have been part of the movement for a decade, are documented here. They were asked to reflect on why they joined the movement, their role, the challenges faced, their idea of peace, and the support they have gathered. I. Mohanty was moved by the prevailing conditions of domestic disturbances in the village, and so she joined the group of Sainiks. She is from Kakabandh village, Mayurbhanj and has taken the role of a trainer. It allows her to learn and replicate experiences with other women. Talking about conflicts, she has stated that:

*Domestic violence (between husband and wife, mother-in-law and son-in-law) and disturbances in SHGs are the major problems in our village. I have tried to resolve a few family feuds at Tambakhuri village and the in-fighting of the Tarapur village SHG. She views that peace can come to villages when souring family relations are transformed. I am happy that my work has received support from my own family. The MSS program generates courage, hope, and believes among women.* (personal communication, July 16, 2015).
The challenges of making an impact on family relations needs sustained effort. For her, transformation at her personal level is immense. The movement has given her a feeling that she is not alone.

A respondent from Tambakhuri village, Mayurbhanj, B. Kabi, has been introduced to the movement through SHGs. Her central role has been with dasta and panja, and among many, she sees gender-based discrimination as a significant impediment to peace and has participated in promoting girl-child education. She says:

The use of alcohol, domestic violence, and lack of unity in villages are the major problems. I have raised a voice on the girl child trafficking, in stopping child marriage and resolving the domestic fights. The members of the Zilla Parisad (district level governance), Sarpanch, and village leaders are sometimes approached in case of domestic violence. I have seen many changes happening, and that is why I discuss and persuade other women to be a part of the MSS movement. (personal communication, July 16, 2015).

She measures peace achievement through success stories of stopping child trafficking and reducing political tensions among villagers.

Encouraged by the idea of seeing women as self-independent, coming from the Thailo village in Jagatsingpur, R. Parida took the role of a Sainik. She has taken the task to encourage women to fight for their rights, not to shy away from expressing views and raise their voice against injustice. She sees petty party politics as an impediment and claims a stake at resolving such crises at the organisational level. She has specifically mentioned MSS’s role in resolving tensions among villagers during cultural events, their participation in anti-liquor campaigns, and domestic violence issues. About the personal experience, she states:

My family is my source of encouragement in this mission. I have got exposure to various places and got experiences by interacting with the MSS members of different districts of Odisha. It gave me
an opportunity to reach out to people that has now translated as my leadership skill. (personal communication, July 16, 2015).

The narratives have an in-built idea of resistance and change and enter a loop in the chain of preventive action. Domestic violence, economic dependence, and abuses dominated their localised definitions of conflict. The resolving of each is to enable transformation in the organic whole of self, family, village, and nation; hence, the incremental change method is the first resort, and any duress is avoided. As MSS believes in courageousness towards building peace, the Shanti Sainiks wear an orange scarf while taking the oath. Sustaining the ideals and demanding participants to think beyond themselves is shared by activists as the most challenging tasks. Family is the common support for the activists, and social peace is the common narrative. The distinctive aspect of such involvement is that the activists draw their agency from both the social and institutional spaces.

**Conclusion**

The conceptual discussions and the grassroots experience reveal that the discourse of violence is central to a gender approach in conflict prevention. The scope of prevention, including reducing the vulnerability of women in household violence, needs determined action. The idea of peace-building cannot be separable from overcoming forms of domination and subordination, both in the public and personal spaces. The contemporary women-led peace activism is an attempt in such a direction. The activists have influenced their own lives and also legitimised their leadership roles. This paper has tried to bring to the fore the stakeholders’ view on field-practices that challenge gender relations to negotiate for peace, though not all aspects of interventions are easily tangible.

The scholars discussing the bottom-up method to peace-building have urged that it is more meaningful to locate community-based indicators that can accurately reflect on-the-ground situations rather than relying on state-induced broad-based indicators (Mac Ginty, 2013). We found in this study that participation can be further deep. To begin with, the lens of self, and it is self-driven indicators that have guided the activists to enact the role of change-makers. It cannot be overlooked that the women-led peace activism, like the MSS, is also a reflection of the stark reality of struggles against social disadvantages to evolve as torchbearers of peace. Joshee and Sihra (2013) mention in their work that MSS women are generally from impoverished rural areas and many lack formal
education. Likewise, the activists of Odisha have emphasised a close cohesion of action between livelihood, education, and empowerment, while documenting their concerns for everyday peace. In the macro understanding, the issues raised by the local entity could be easily suppressed, and even by its mundane nature may fail to get the required attention. Hence, more advocacy must be raised by bringing in reflection from rural spaces, from where the processes for conflict prevention and peace must mark a beginning rather than an end.

Notes:

i Johan Galtung had introduced an alternative framework for the analysis of violence by discussing that violence is much more than killing or causing physical harm. Violence exists when the potential scope of development is held back due to conditions and relationships that emerge from the unequal distribution of resources and power. Structural violence can be defined in the forms of exploitation and marginalisation in the institutionalised structures. Its permanence or its static conditions in basic culture comes as cultural violence. Poverty, caste deprivation, domestic violence, etc. is violence [Galtung, J. (1990). Cultural violence. Journal of Peace Research, 27(3), 291-305; Cockburn, C. (2004). The continuum of violence: A gender perspective on war and peace. In W. Giles & J. Hyndman (Eds), Sites of violence: Gender and conflict zones (pp. 24-44). Los Angeles and London: University of California Press].

ii As per the World Economic Forum’s gender gap index, 2020, India ranks 112th globally in terms of the gender gap. It may take 99.5 years to close the gender gap narrowed from 2019. Only one-quarter of women, compared with 82 per cent of men, constitute the workforce. Violence, forced marriage, and discrimination in access to health remain widespread [PTI (2019, December 17). India slips to 112th rank on WEF’s gender gap index, in bottom 5 on health, economic fronts. Hindustan Times].


iv The conflict transformation has been discussed since the 1980s’. It emphasises the need to study conflicts as a dynamic phenomenon and inherent in human relationships. It is the way of seeing a social conflict by using multiple lenses – seeing the immediate context, relationships, and structures that inform the context and finally, envision a way in which conflicts can be addressed. It discusses the transformation from unpeaceful to peaceful relationships [Lederach, J.P. (1996). Preparing for peace: conflict transformation across cultures. New York: Syracuse University Press].

v Eighty-four countries have drafted a national action plan in support of the Unites Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, (UNSCR), 2000, and Nepal and Bangladesh are the only South Asian countries among them (National Action Plans, 2020).

vi A heterogeneous and complicated term, social imaginaries, has been informed by a range of intellectual inputs. It may not be possible to give it a fair space of discussion here due to its limited use in the paper. It is centrally concerned with the collective forms of social interaction and practices, change and continuity that make up our social life [Stephenson, Jr., M.O. (2011). Considering the relationships among social conflict, social imaginaries, resilience, and community-based organization leadership. Ecology and Society, 16(1); Adams, S., Blokker, P., Doyle, N.J., Krummel, J.W.M. & Smith, J.C.A. (2015). Social imaginaries in debate. Social Imaginaries, 1(1), 15-52].
Acharya Ramamurti, a Gandhian, had been working for the people in Bihar. He was behind the inception of Mahila Shanti Sena. Few academicians from Canada in collaboration with Unnayan initiated the MSS movement in Odisha in 2005.

Gandhi was on his way to the creation of Shanti Sena in Sevagram in February 1948. He was assassinated, and the concept remained unrealised until Vinoba Bhave took it in his hands. In a meeting in March 1948, Vinoba Bhave, Jawaharlal Nehru, Kakasaheb Kalelkar, and others acknowledged that Gandhi had suggested the organisation of Shanti Sena [Weber, T. (1996). Gandhi’s peace army: The Shanti Sena and Unarmed Peacekeeping. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press].

From the 1950s till the 1970s, the Shanti Sena under the leadership of Bhave was active in re-integrating criminals into the society, intervening in communal riots in villages, and carried humanitarian works during the refugee crisis. Later, Jay Prakash Narayan took it forward and integrated it with the resistance to the National Emergency in 1975. Its last known history was recorded in the 1980s’ [Lynch, D. (2004). Three peace forces: The khudai khidmitgars, shanti sena and nonviolent peaceforce. Asian Reflections].

The rationale behind choosing Vaishali (Bihar) for the origin of the MSS was because of its historical association with the Champaran movement of Gandhi. The place has also been a witness to Vinoba Bhave’s ‘Land Gift movement’ and Jay Prakash Narayan’s Total Revolution of 1974. [Pearson, Anne N. (2004). The Mahila Shanti Sena: New women’s peace movement in India. Peace Magazine, 20(1)].
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