

REPORT ON
STATE LEVEL MAHILA SHANTI SENA CONVENTION IN ORISSA
Venue- Kakbandh Village, Rasgobindpur Block, Mayurbhanj, Orissa

A state level convention of Mahila Shanti Sena (MSS) was held at Kakbandh in Mayurbhanj district on 20th April 2008. The movement has become very vibrant and lively one. We felt the need that different groups needed to come together for a session of sharing and learning and take the movement forward.

It was a gathering of over 1100 participants from our existing 8 clusters from 3 districts namely, Mayurbhanj, Jagatsinghpur and Balasore. There were also members representing other groups from Basta and Jaleswar who have shown an interest in joining MSS.



Women attending the State level MSS convention at Kakbandh, Mayurbhanj

It is the height of summer. Imagine the scorching heat. Imagine that the women came from a distance of 275km from Jagatsinghpur by train and bus, others traveled by road a distance of 60 / 70 kms from their villages. Think of a typical rural woman who would have had to complete all her chores for the whole family to make this journey. Her day might even have begun at 3 or 4 am.

The Setting: For this very large gathering we had selected a nearby sal grove. The natural setting not only provided some relief from the heat but was also symbolic in the sense of protecting our environment, generating an awareness and staying close to nature, which is an important part of Gandhian philosophy. Kakbandh is a village of Santhal tribals. Members from the community, men and women alike, helped us to do up the place in the traditional way. For example, the gateway or arch was made up of fresh mango and neem leaves woven together.

The Invitees: It was a conscious decision not to invite officials or politicians but to have with us invitees who are deeply committed and who could talk to and inspire the rural women at their level. We were lucky to have with us the following special guests:

Smt. Tapasi Praharaj – Social activist & Secy. All India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA)
Dr. Rama Shankar Singh- Prof. , Mc Master University, Canada
Sri Krishna Kumar – Noted Gandhian & Founder Member of Shram Bharati, Bihar.

Prof. Haribandhu Panda- Former Prof. of IRMA, Anand and Present faculty member of Human Development Foundation, Bhubaneswar.

Sri Sudarsan Das- Founder member of Unnayan and present Secretary of Human Development Foundation, Bhubaneswar.

Sri Sushant Verma- Country Representative, Heifer International.

Prof. Saroj Chowdhry- Scientist from ISRO.



From left Ms. Tapasi Praharaj, Sri. Krishna Kumar, Prof. Haribandhu Panda, Dr. Rama Shankar Singh, Sri. Sudarsan Das and Sri. Bhanu Panigrahi

We missed the presence of Smt. Lopamudra Mohanty, Ex-Chairman, State Mahila Commission and Sri Rabindra Upadhyaya, noted Gandhian at present working in Assam for the poor and marginalized who could not turn up due to their ill health though they had confirmed their participation.

The Programme: The programme started at 10.30 am with the lighting of the lamp and floral tribute to Mahatma Gandhi- the apostle of peace, and an inaugural song. After a 5 minute exercise aimed at settling down and gathering of thoughts, there was a brief introduction of the guests on the dais by Sri Sudarsan Das.



Mahila Shanti Sainiks lightening the lamp

This was followed by a brief outlining of the objective of the convention by Smt. Rashmi Mohanty, Secretary, Unnayan. She gave a background of the movement, its present status in Orissa, the issues with which the MSS groups are engaged. She articulated the difficulties which each member of MSS faces and overcomes in the interest of her commitment. She shared that the objective was to learn from one another so that there is a renewal of the initial spirit and a resolve to spread

the message of peace and harmony through word and deed.

Sharing by representatives from different clusters: A major focus of this gathering was to learn about the experience of the members from different clusters. And what a sharing it was! Seven women and one gentleman representing the 8 clusters spoke about what MSS has meant to them and their experience over the past one year. What was amazing was the range of issues mentioned, the initiatives taken by the individuals along with their groups and the clarity of their understanding of what is not just and the need to remove it. For example, **Sunia Marandi** from Tikpada who spoke about the illegal felling of trees from the forest and the awareness that her group created to get the villagers to stop this. Similarly **Minarani Behera** from Khunta cluster spoke about how the women in her area were harassed and abused by the customers hanging around the country liquor shop in the main area. With their effort that shop was removed from the market place so that women can come and go in peace. **Bharati Kabi** of Gadighati spoke about the initiatives taken by MSS members during the July 2007 flood in north Orissa to urge families to move to safer areas, to collect and distribute dry food rations among the flood affected and to cook and feed the flood affected people for 3 whole days. **Sarojini** from Jagatsinghpur spoke about the success of MSS in tackling the lethargy of the officials in responding to the flood situation in 2006. Wading through knee-deep water 200 odd women managed to get the district administrative officers to move out of the security of their office to visit the area and see the plight of the people. The commitment they extracted from them has resulted in corrective steps being taken by the government. **Padmakshi** from Darkholi cluster spoke about going beyond livelihood to tackle social issues like alcoholism which is affecting the lives of so many women in the rural areas. **Sushama Parida** from Jhatiada cluster spoke about how the training helped them to organize themselves to have an identity of their own. **Sri Kamalakanta Behera** from Morada cluster spoke about the work being done by MSS, how it is being appreciated by the community and the growing support it is receiving from the men folk. **Shantilata Prusti** from Suliapada spoke about how they were influenced by the MSS work in other areas and requested for Unnayan to accept and train them. They are new members who are looking forward to learn from others so that they can take initiatives for conflict resolution and establishing peace and harmony in their area.



Bharati Kabi of Gadighati grama panchayat sharing her experience

areas. **Sushama Parida** from Jhatiada cluster spoke about how the training helped them to organize themselves to have an identity of their own. **Sri Kamalakanta Behera** from Morada cluster spoke about the work being done by MSS, how it is being appreciated by the community and the growing support it is receiving from the men folk. **Shantilata Prusti** from Suliapada spoke about how they were influenced by the MSS work in other areas and requested for Unnayan to accept and train them. They are new members who are looking forward to learn from others so that they can take initiatives for conflict resolution and establishing peace and harmony in their area.

This was a stunning presentation. Even for us at Unnayan who have been involved in this whole process, it was an amazing experience. We were humbled by their spirit. These women are the real heroines of rural India--- the agents of change.

Address by the Guests: **Dr. Rama Shankar Singh** conveyed the good wishes sent by Acharya Rammurti and Prof. Srigopal Mohanty. He touched on the justification for the importance given to women in the MSS. He justified it by citing examples of discrimination against women in different countries and Gandhi's conviction that women can and should play a role in bringing about change in society. At the same time, men also play an important role in the whole process and MSS does not rule out the participation of men in the process. MSS works for the rights of both women and the men.



Dr. Rama Singh addressing the Sabha

Prof. Haribandhu Panda spoke that his academic life is usually confined to the theory part. Here he was able to acquaint himself with the practical application. As a teacher he has always been teaching in a classroom, but today he had the opportunity to learn from the women something that he would take back with him to the classroom.

Sri Krishna Kumar who has been involved in the Gandhian work even much before MSS came to be organized. He spoke

about how the movement had begun in Vaishali and how the movement spread to different parts of the country and outside. He said that he was highly impressed by the success and strength of the movement in Orissa within a short period of time. The success of this gathering will be an inspiration to others.

Smt. Tapasi Praharaj, quoting from government statistics, pointed out how even the minimum requirements of food-clothing and shelter, leave alone minimum health and educational support, not being available to majority of women in the rural area. She spoke about the minimum rights that everyone is entitled to and how women need to organize themselves to fight for these rights.



Smt. Tapasi Praharaj addressing the sabha

Sri Sudarsan Das spoke about the impressive leap in the growth of the rural women associated with MSS from what they were earlier to their discipline, commitment, articulation and achievement. He said the women representatives who spoke on the occasion greatly impressed him and he looks forward to the day that each and every woman will not only be able to stand up and speak for her rights but will be able to achieve the peace and harmony in the community: that is the goal of the Mahila Shanti Sena.

The session ended at 2 PM with a vote of thanks by Arup Abhisek.

We are happy to report that it was not only a gathering of women, but a gathering of women who were totally involved in the proceeds. They listened carefully, responded actively and certainly took something back with them from this convention.

Later in the evening we, staffs of Unnayan and a few representatives from different clusters, had a small group discussion with Prof. Rama Singh and Sri Krishna Kumar regarding the organizational future of Mahila Shanti Sena.

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