
Mahila Shanti Sena

Founded: February 2002 ♀ (Women's Peace Brigade International)

M S S E - N E W S L E T T E R ✨ J U N E 7 t h , 2 0 1 0

Compiled by:

Dr. Rama Singh, Professor, Department of Biology and Centre for Peace Studies, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.

Ph: (905) 525-9140 ext. 24378, Fax: (905) 522-6066; singh@mcmaster.ca; www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/gandhi

Acharya Ramamurti (1913-2010)

Acharya Ramamurti, a revered, senior social activist and leader in the best of Gandhian tradition, was the Director of Shrambharati – a non-government organization based in Khadigram, Jamui (Bihar). After the independence, heeding the call of Gandhi to serve the poor of the villages, on May 10, 1954 Ramamurti resigned from his comfortable professorial job as a Lecturer in Queens College at Varanasi and joined Khadigram Ashram with his young family. He served the people of India through his personal services in Bihar as well as through his involvement in and guidance to various peace movements that swept Bihar and the rest of India during 1960-1970s. In Khadigram, started by Dharendra Mazumdar, Ramamurti helped to build a Gandhian Service Institution for the rural villages and the place became a centre for the development of social leadership.



The Shrambharati Ashram is located in the district of Jamui in Bihar, about 160 km east of the historic city of Patna, the capital of Bihar. In April 1951, Vinoba's Land Gift movement was launched, making it necessary for a workers training centre to be started. On February 26, 1952 Shri Dharendra Mazumdar, a close associate of Gandhi, came with five workers and started Workers Training Centre. One time the Ashram had a staff of over 70 and a residential training facility for over 250.

The life style at the Ashram was rigorous: an eight hour work day (4 hrs of bread labor and 4 hrs of intellectual work); equal wages for equal work, and no discrimination against women; experiment in productive education along Gandhian line; elementary education from class I to VIII. Students were exposed to three hours of productive

minor labor in farming and cloth making, 3 hours of formal teaching, and 2 hours of games, music, etc.

In late 1957s Ramamurti became engaged in Vinoba's Land Gift Movement and walked from village to village collecting land for the landless. This followed being away from the walls of the Institution, directing work in villages, educating people in collective, non-violent ways of living., and the values of sharing. During 1970-1980, with Jaya Prakash Narayan, he led the Bihar Andolan and worked for participatory democracy, building up peoples' power as against organized power of the State. During 1980-1990 he carried out intensive education work in his own "Earn and Learn" Centre and in thirty neighboring villages. From 1990-2001 he worked for preventive peace action besides regular institutional activities.

Acharya Ramamurti played a major role in Jaya Prakash Narayan's Total Revolution Movement. He was JP's right hand and a spiritual advisor to late Prime Minister V.P. Singh. He shunned political position and power and worked for social change. Jaya Prakash Narayan's death and the following political climate left him withdrawn inward without a clear goal. He used to call it the decade of the wilderness.

I visited him for the first time in 1998 at Khadigram. Since I was looking for a way to get involved in some peace-related work in India, I asked him (keeping his age in mind-he was 85 then) what his future plans were, what he wanted to do? His answer was that one can help in many ways such as

by way of making donations, etc. However, if one wants to make a major change, India is ready for a new peace movement through empowering women. Referring to the legislative changes involving panchayatiraj and 30% reservations for women in elected bodies in India, he said if someone could teach women about their rights and responsibilities, they would take their rights and build a peaceful and just society, a peaceful neighborhood.

Obviously he had done lot of thinking and had read Gandhi and Vinoba's writings on the power of women in peace building. We agreed to make a new beginning and I offered my help to hold an International Conference on Peace, Non-violence and participatory democracy. The conference was co-organized by Shrambharati (NGO, Khadigram) and McMaster University and held at the site of the legendary city of Vaishali (Bihar) from Feb 23-25, 2002 and it was there that the Mahila Shanti Sena was founded and the first batch of 108 Mahila Shanti Sainiks were trained.

After the conference Acharyaji remarked that the wilderness was over.

The first few years MSS movement spread very rapidly and starting from Bihar it spread to Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Tripura and Orissa. Mahila Shanti Sena had annual conferences and based on the availability of funds there were regular MSS training camps. While we all felt that we could have done more had we had funds to support MSS activities, Acharyaji was pleased with the progress and he had built a strong

team. MSS is a movement, not an NGO and as such all its programs are available to any group that wants to help women's cause.

A high point in my association with Acharyaji was his visit to Canada in September 2003. He delivered the Eighth Annual Mahatma Gandhi Lecture at the Centre for Peace Studies, McMaster University and spent three weeks touring Canada.

Mahila Shanti Sena peace movement is Acharya Ramamurti's special contribution to the people of India and to the world. I saw him last in December 2009 in Patna. He said he was pleased with the progress of Mahila Shanti Sena and was sure of its success. Making the Mahila Shanti Sena peace movement a success and helping women to realize their true potential for constructive peace building would be the true homage to Acharya Ramamurti.

Acharya Ramamurti was born on January 22, 1913 in the village of Ardhpur in District Jaunpur (UP). He came from an upper-class, farming family. He used to tell the story that in view of his pursuing higher education the expectation in the family was that he would grow up to get the honorary title of "Chhote Laat (Deputy Lord)", customarily known as Laat Shaheb, in British India. Ramamurti had different plans. He received a MA degree in history from Lucknow and quit his comfortable professorial position to become a freedom fighter, an educationist, a Gandhian thinker, and a social activist. He held several honorary positions. He was President of the national Gandhian organization Servseva Sangh; Chairman,

National Education Commission; Director, Gandhian Studies Institute (Varanasi), and lately Chairman of a committee to decide on the process and the procedure how to honor the soldiers of JP's movement in Bihar.

Acharya Ramamurti was a witness to Gandhi's India and he lamented to have survived long enough to see the demise of Gandhi's dream. He was the last link of Gandhi-JP socialism.

Acharayaji passed away on May 20, 2010 in Patna (India).

Rama Singh,

Professor

Department of Biology and
Centre for Peace Studies

McMaster University, Hamilton, Canada

E-mail: singh@mcmaster.ca

Acknowledgement: This article was prepared with the kind assistance of Ramchandra Rahi, Krishna Kumar, Ram Gulam, Dipak Malik and Rajnarain Singh.