What’s Distinctive about the Mahila Shanti Sena (Women's Peace Corp)?
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It was my privilege to be part of the inaugural Vaishali Sabha organized by Shramabharati Khadigram in February, 2002 that witnessed the beginnings of what has become a remarkable movement for the advancement of Indian women in parts of northern and north-east India. Since that time, I have kept apprised of developments and have had the opportunity to publish an article in a Canadian magazine and to speak about the Mahila Shanti Sena to a number of groups in Canada and the US: at Hindu temples; at classes at McMaster and Laurier University; at an academic conference of South Asian Studies in Wisconsin, USA; and in front of community groups in Hamilton. Everywhere that I have spoken about the Mahila Shanti Sena there has been great interest. People in North America are very interested to learn about the Panchayati Raj Institutions, about the reservation of seats for women at the federal, state and district levels of governance that has resulted in over one million women being elected in India; and people are especially excited to learn about the leadership of the Mahila Shanti Sena and their efforts to help other women and their communities to more effectively and creatively meet and surmount some of the many challenges they face in their daily lives in India today.

I would like to comment about some of the elements that I believe are distinctive about the Mahila Shanti Sena among rural women’s development projects, and that, taken together, make this movement exceptional, more likely to succeed in the long term, and worthy of the attention of funders, women and men of other ‘developing’ countries, and the general public.

First, this movement has been initiated at the grass-roots level, with the assistance of a long-standing Gandhian organization, Shramabharati Khadigram, that has spent over 50 years focused on the needs of rural Biharis. It is not a ‘top-down’ development project that has been conceived in some development theorist’s office, whether in the West or in urban India, and parachuted into a rural setting.

Second, the Mahila Shanti Sena has seized the extraordinary opportunity presented by the arrival of the PRI (Panchayati Raj Institutions) in 1994 and the subsequent unprecedented numbers of women elected to district councils in Bihar and other states to concentrate on assisting women, recognizing that as Panchayat members women could begin to influence policy priorities at the local level in a way that truly met the needs of women, children, families and neighbourhoods.

Third, the Mahila Shanti Sena is purposefully politically non-aligned and is thus not subject to politically partisan agendas. For the same reason, it refuses funding from any political parties.

Fourth, it relies primarily on the small financial contributions offered by the women participants themselves (including annual membership fees of Rs. 5). Those involved in the MSS are overwhelmingly volunteers, committed to the means and aims of the MSS, determined to bring about healthy change in their communities.

Fifth, participation in the MSS has cut across caste/jati, class, and religious lines. (Any woman over 18 years of age can become an MSS member.) While a large percentage of the participants
have been illiterate labourers, others have been from a cross-section of socio-economic and educational backgrounds. It is a truly inclusive movement.

Sixth, its organization is largely decentralized, non-hierarchical, and based on a consultative and collaborative decision-making process. It is also experimental, and open to self-analysis, criticism, and change. If something isn’t working, it can be dropped or changed. Creative problem-solving is encouraged.

Seventh, its training schedules are designed to cause minimal disruption to women’s routines in their homes, work and families, and so to maximize attendance. Further, the topics included in the training address a spectrum of women’s issues and concerns, from the pernicious effects of early marriage, dowry, alcohol, and debt on women’s lives, to the need and means for the education of girls, to conflict resolution techniques. Raising consciousness about issues, sharing problems, and discussing strategies for their resolution all help to create a sense of commonality, of confidence and shared responsibility to move forward and be agents of change.

Eighth, the Mahila Shanti Sena has focused on peace-building, conflict-resolution and problem-solving skills to an unusual degree among comparable grass-roots development organizations. Violence and its threat remain a constant hindrance to the security and sustainable development of many local communities in India. Women are often targeted by violence (or certain forms of violence). Being given some simple tools to prevent and reduce conflict, and address direct violence, as well as being supported by the strength of numbers, is an extraordinary feature of the Mahila Shanti Sena, bearing witness to its name.

I would like to turn briefly to a statement by Mahatma Gandhi regarding his vision for India, a vision in which women enjoy the same rights as men, before concluding with a few remarks about his Constructive Program and its relationship to the aims and means of the MSS. Gandhi often spoke about the India of his dreams which he described this way in 1932:

“I shall work for an India in which the poorest shall feel it is their country in whose making they have an effective voice; an India in which there will be no high class or low class of people; an India in which all communities shall live in perfect harmony. There can be no room in such an India for the curse of untouchability or the curse of intoxicating drinks and drugs. Women will enjoy the same rights as men. Since we shall be at peace with all the rest of the world, neither exploiting, nor being exploited, we should have the smallest army imaginable. All interests not in conflict with the interests of the dumb millions will be scrupulously respected, whether foreign or indigenous. This is the India of my dreams” (Young India).

Gandhi was to spend most of his last decade or so working towards the realization of this dream through his “Constructive Program” for permanent social reform. Among the requirements for real social reform he included the revitalization of villages or local communities in a manner that promoted self-reliance (both economic and psychological) and character-building; that promoted participatory democracy, shared leadership and decision-making; that promoted a spirit of sacrifice for the common good; and a concept of trusteeship that involved the voluntary sharing of wealth. He insisted that leaders be the change they wished to see in others, and warned that
change must be organic; that while the social reforms aspired to may be revolutionary, they usually take time to succeed, so patience is a virtue! The constructive program must be built slowly, Gandhi said, brick by brick, with the creative, willing and sacrificial participation of all. He also recognized women’s special abilities in this kind of leadership, and this kind of sacrifice.

When looking at the achievements of the Mahila Shanti Sena over the past three years, I believe that Gandhi would be very pleased, for in their activities, their methods and their aims, one finds many echoes of Gandhi’s prescription for the kind of creative social transformation that he felt was necessary for India to realize true ‘swaraj’.