Women and Peace-Building
Community Development

C. RAJA RAJESWARI

Cet article examine les programmes de développement communautaire et comment ils ont contribué à la paix. L'auteure met l'accent sur les expériences d'apprentissage et les défis que les femmes de la base, activistes pour la paix, ont rencontrés quand elles ont travaillé pour un changement dans leur communauté.

We came together to supplement our families' income, while earning some money we have overcome our communal and caste differences, and joined our hands to deal with conflict that came in our way and we dealt with it!
—Resident of Shankernager Slum, Hyderabad, India

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Communal riots[1] in modern Hyderabad,[2] India go back to 1938.[3] Since then periodic episodes of communal violence have left a climate of mistrust and fear among Hindus and Muslims, especially in those places where both communities reside together. Disparities have become wider and wider, drawing lines between the communities and leading to misunderstandings and broken relationships. This tension erupts from time to time in communal clashes, which result in the loss of human life, loss of property, and loss of social harmony.

The Henry Martyn Institute (HMI) based in Hyderabad, India since 1969, promotes reconciliation between people of different faiths and cultures. It encourages practical grassroots involvement with the objective of improving relationships between divided groups and communities. HMI achieves its goals through a variety of academic and community-based programs, most of which are targeted to women as they are seen as active agents of peace-building and conflict resolution at local levels.

In 1990 HMI, aware of the need for reconciliation and relief work as an immediate intervention to communal rioting, brought together people from the divided Hindu and Muslim communities living in Hyderabad's Old City.[5] HMI facilitated the establishment of the Aman Shanti Forum,[4] an organization aimed at promoting peace through reconciliation and healing processes with members—men and women—from Hindu, Muslim and Christian communities.

By 1996 the Aman Shanti Forum had identified the need for long-term intervention in those communities that needed it most. HMI thus laid the foundations of its grassroots community development work in Sultan Shahi, the most prominent area of violence in the Old City and the worst affected area during the 1990 communal violence. HMI started a similar project in 2000 in another area of Hyderabad, Shankernager, a slum with wide caste disparities. These projects are called as Aman Shanti Community Centres.

The centres were established as a result of HMI's commitment to addressing a community's economic, social, cultural, and political needs as an essential part of the process of building sustainable peace. Some of the principles upon which HMI's work is based, as is the work of the Aman Shanti Centers, are that:

- •development work, if done intentionally, can be a means through which communities come together, building trust through relationship; and
- •using an empowering process of working with a community strengthens leadership, resulting in people's greater confidence to deal with challenges, taking action which makes a difference locally. (*HMI Annual Report 7*)

HMI's community development programs are, therefore, aimed at involving communities—and especially the Hindu and Muslim women in those communities—in grassroots work, with local participation and leadership, to improve the quality of life based on the expressed local needs. The projects initially targeted women specifically as it was felt that women could promote healing and reconciliation across ethnic divides more effectively. By empowering the women in the local communities to effect change HMI hoped to encourage attitudinal changes and to broaden both women's and men's efforts at building a peaceful society in which they all could live.

Perspectives in Hyderabad, India

The Shankernager project in particular includes a women's unit that offers structured classes for tailoring to provide women with useful skills as well as help build their confidence and leadership abilities. The unit also fosters communal harmony by giving Hindu and Muslim women a place where they can share their increased awareness on health issues, on day-to-day news, on issues related to women, and on communal matters, such as their relationships with their families and their neighbours.

The women have started self-employment and income-generation programs to increase their economic independence. For example, a micro-credit program was put in place to enable the purchase of sewing machines. The program is run by women from the local communities who decide on who gets loans and on the mode of repayment. Working together has empowered the women and help them improve their standard of living. It has also led to new friendships among women from these divided communities.

The Sultan Shahi project has a school that caters in particular to dropouts and young children who are unable to attend the local schools for various reasons. The school is specifically aimed at fostering goodwill and tolerance to help bridge gaps between the divided communities.

Health clinics in each of the projects focus on the health needs of the community. Health education of the community is a central focus of the clinics' activities.

Literary programs and reading room sessions aimed at equipping people with the knowledge and skills that can help them to grow as leaders are also central to each of the development projects.

By creating a space where women from divided communities can work together for a common benefit, HMI has facilitated the building of trust in these communities. Social workers from HMI play a crucial role in bringing communities to this stage, and particularly, in motivating women from these communities to participate in the programs. Working together to learn a craft or fulfil a need leads to feelings of solidarity as well as develops leadership

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skills among the women. Women are empowered by participating in collective decision-making processes that were previously conducted only by men. They are further empowered by being provided with information about socio-economic concerns, health and hygiene issues, adult education, politics, communal violence, caste issues, etc. This is a development strategy that uses two-way communication to reveal the participant's underlying attitudes, to help them adapt their views and acquire new knowledge and skills, as well as spread new social messages to a larger audience.[6]

HMI's practical work in bringing Hindus and Muslims together in humanitarian and development programs has created a platform for an interfaith dialogue. Sultan Shahi and Shankernager Centres, HMI's two development projects, provide a space where people from both communities can voice their issues and together clarify their misconceptions as well as develop new understandings. These programs are an example of the way in which women have contributed to peace-building initiatives in their communities.

Local People Seeking Solutions: Sultan Shahi

On February 27, 2002, in Gujarat state, 26 women, 19 men and 12 children were burnt alive in a railway compartment at Godhra station. Reports say that the tragedy was started by the provocative behaviour of *kar sevaks*, (volunteers involved in rebuilding temple at Ayodhya) who allegedly beat and threatened Muslim passengers, insisting that they chant "*Jai Shree Ram*" (praising God in a Hindu fashion). They even unveiled Muslim women. After the burning of the train and the tragic death of innocents, 16 of 24 districts of the state were engulfed in organized mob attacks, especially against women. The violence and unrest continued until mid-March. Even now incidents of violence are still being reported in Gujarat.[7] The ongoing violence and mindless killings have shattered the nation and caused rifts in the relationship between the Hindu and Muslim communities. The ef-

fects of these events were also felt in the Old City Hyderabad with a significant rise in tension levels.

Panic simmered in various areas of the Old City as people responded with fear and anger to the horrific violence in Gujarat. Many believed that the violence was result of aggressive behaviour on the part of members of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, a religious group committed to safeguarding Hindu beliefs. Schools and centres were deserted as parents kept children at home, or even packed up belongings and moved out of highly volatile areas like Sultan Shahi. There were minor incidents of stone pelting in Sultan Shahi and a small fire was started near a temple. The fire was quickly contained by local Hindu and Muslim leaders who found a way to protect the entry point to the temple, and by local police who kept a visible presence at the site for a number of days. The Sultan Shahi Centre staff visited different homes in the locality and surrounding areas, sharing information and listening to comments and fears. About 30 women assembled at the Centre to plan strategies to protect their homes and families. After lengthy and at times heated discussion the women agreed that they would each keep watch in their own lanes, encourage men in their families not to participate in or add to any of the tensions, and be a visible presence in their lanes immediately after the Friday congregational prayers, one of the times outsiders have triggered incidents of violence in the area in the past.

The choice to be a visible presence keeping watch in their own neighbourhood is a new development for Sultan Shahi women. The strategy reflects the feeling by some residents that they can actively contribute to what happens—or doesn't happen—in their neighborhoods. This commitment to the neighbourhood became especially clear when another non-governmental organization (NGO) working for peace asked Sultan Shahi Centre staff to send women volunteers to help form a human chain for peace near the *Mecca masjid* (the major Old City mosque) following the Friday afternoon prayers. The staff and other local women considered this invitation but decided that Sultan Shahi was their first priority: "There will be many people at *Mecca masjid* for security purposes and if we also join them then there can be no problem. But if we return and find that Sultan Shahi has problems, then we cannot handle them." The women unanimously decided to stay and be vigilant in their own neighbourhood (see *HMI Annual Report* 8).

Together We Are Strong: Shankernager

Shankernager women's income-generation unit was started by a group of 28 women to supplement their families' incomes. Women decided to learn how to manufacture household cleaning products that are regularly used in the community. The program started with good team spirit and leadership, and the women were glad they

were able to contribute to their families in a small way. However, there was a lot of resistance from one neighbour, a police constable living besides the Centre. He objected to the production of chemical products, claiming that the strong odour was harming the health of his family members. The HMI social worker, along with the local women, tried to talk to him but he would not give the group a chance to explain. After this incident the women discussed the police constable's troublesome behaviour in the community and his unpleasant way of victimizing women but they were frightened to take action against him.

A week later the women returned to the manufacturing of their products. The constable threatened the women that he would throw out the products or burn them He also abused them with foul language. The women took their material to another place to finish the work and then, for the time being, stopped production. They felt very offended and wanted to lodge a complaint against him at the police station. They also thought, however, that putting him in a position to lose face in the community might have even worse consequences. The women thus decided to give him a chance to understand the facts behind their efforts. They continued to work.

Once again the constable came along with a local leader to hinder the work. The women acted very tactfully and took the opportunity to explain the benefits of the program and the importance of the constable's valuable cooperation in making this project a success. They discreetly pointed out that neighbouring communities would look down on them if a lack of cooperation within the neighbourhood were discovered. Once the constable was made to feel important and told that his contributions in the program were valuable, he cooled down. The discussion then became more meaningful as the women were able to express their concerns about health hazards, the need for a bigger place and more resources, and the importance of their community's support. The local leader and the constable then assured the women they would find a government building for the women's manufacturing work. The constable expressed his apologies for being rude and said that the women should to continue their work in the present location until they found a more suitable place to manufacture the products. He left appreciating the program and the women for their keen interest in supporting themselves and their families. Whenever the women recall the situation, they feel proud of the way they handled the situation.

Conclusion

In the Sultan Shahi and Shankernager Centres, women succeeded in not only eliminating a source of conflict in their communities, but they also increased their sense of solidarity in the process. The friendship, solidarity and sisterhood that is emerges as the women work together to

find solutions for a variety of variety of problems is empowering to the women as individuals, and to the group as a whole. HMI is unique in specifically developing programs aimed at creating opportunities for interfaith groups to build bridges between their communities. The starting point for any grassroots peace-building must be based on the practical. Women give primary importance to food for the family, their children's education and economic security. HMI's interventions contribute to building sustainable peace by addressing basic needs, including the strengthening of women's capacities in economic, social, cultural, and political matters. Creating opportunities for women from divided communities to share their achievements and challenges, as well as acknowledging the positive changes their efforts have made, are essential steps in peace-building. As Dyan E. Mazurana and Susan R. McKay observe

> ...While structural reconstruction is important and necessary, by itself it neither builds nor ensures peace. Many NGOs and grassroots groups were found to view peace building as a process, not a product, through which psychosocial, relational and spiritual needs were addressed. Grieving, sharing stories, participating in actions demanding governmental accountability, training in responding to post-traumatic stress disorder at individual and community levels, and working on common projects such as building schools and running radio stations were some of the processes through which communities sought to heal and rebuild communities just and peace. (92)

There are, however, challenges that need to be addressed. It remains difficult to reconcile government policy with NGO's interests. For example, women's group in Shankernager, a multi-faith and multi-caste group, approached the government for financial support for its micro-credit programs. The government would not support this group under any of its state-designed welfare programs are they are aimed exclusively at single caste or single religious groups. This choice was made by the state for various policy reasons. The government departments concerned suggested that the women divide the group according to caste and religion in order to benefit from the government programs. The women were not ready to divide their group and, therefore, were not eligible for any government assistance. Through its development programs, HMI is putting its energies into changing underlying attitudes and misconceptions and building solidarity and peace by enabling women, and men, in divided communities to come together in a safe space for interfaith dialogue. These interfaith spaces and groups should be recognized and supported by the State as they are enormously important in the peace and reconciliation process.

The need to work for conflict resolution and peace building is urgent. Some may say that our efforts are a drop in the ocean. But, many drops make the ocean. HMI is committed to encouraging NGOs in the social development field to be more sensitive to the interfaith spaces and to community development programs as a way to foster peace among divided communities.

C. Raja Rajeswari has been working with the Henry Martyn Institute for the past seven years coordinating the community development programs.

[1] Communal rioting between two religious communities is violent and virulent. Often religious sentiments are used to trigger violence by vested interests, such as those who wish to disrupt order and discredit the state government.
[2] Hyderabad is a centre of Islamic culture. It is also unique among the southern cities of India in that Urdu is one of the major languages spoken. It is India's fifth-largest city founded in 1590 by Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah
[3] Abraham Pediny was a student at HMI. He conducted a study on history of communal rioting in modern Hyderabad and prepared a materials folder for HMI in 1998.
[4] *Aman* and *Shanti* are words that mean peace in Urdu and Hindi respectively.
[5] Hyderabad is divided into the old and new city. The Musi River marks the beginning of the Old City of Hyderabad with its impressive Islamic monuments. It still retains much of its nineteenth-century atmosphere.
[6] See Manjula as an example of the way two-way communication, as a development strategy, contributes to leadership and empowerment.
[7] See "Genocide, Gujarat 2002," a fact-finding report on Gujarat violence.

References

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