

Peace Efforts of Women: An Asian Perspective

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Abstract:

History is replete with instances where woman have afforded succor in times of strife and turmoil, and brought to bear a sobering effect on contemporary socio-political processes. This articles forays into gender perspectives based on women's peace activism in Japan and India against war and militarism -- gleaned from recent history. The author opines although women's participation at the family and community level is significant, when it comes to agreements concerning peace and security, as well as in critical wartime decisions, their voices at the political level get sidelined, or brushed aside as inconsequential. Women must claim their political space to correct this imbalance, and bridge "disconnects of sorts" obtaining in varying degrees in different walks of life.

Keywords: Women, Peace, Peace Activism, Peace Negotiators

Introduction

Women constitute nearly half of humanity. They are hidden persuaders, articulators of national values, not only 'bearers', but torch-bearers for peaceful co-existence of generations to come, yet most vulnerable to defilement and susceptible to assimilation. Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen says, "the afflicted world in which we live is characterized by deeply unequal sharing of the burden of adversities between men and women. Only a pluralistic view of gender concerns and a "new agenda for action" can help combat gender inequality manifesting in myriad forms, and enable a whole generation of people turn a new leaf toward an era of peace and prosperity" (Sen, 2001). Despite the short shrift meted out to womenfolk in many developing societies, they have achieved a pride of place in the peace firmament, as evident from the fact that as many as eighteen Nobel Peace Prize winners till date have been women.

Peace, democracy, gender equality and development are interrelated. Armed conflicts not only kill soldiers and civilians, but also can ruin national economies and set back development goals. Women and women's organisations and movements, over the years, mobilised support for peace and disarmament. From the late nineteenth century to the present day, several women and women's organizations have worked to transform their local, national and global communities, through non-violent means. For generations women had served as peace educators, both in their families and in the societies. For women, both war and peace form a continuum of violence. Women excel in their roles as social evangelists, from times immemorial.

Be it inter-state wars or ethnic conflicts, women bore more than their fair share of the suffering, from displacement to the denial of the right to food and healthcare. Women and girls are targeted for the most brutal forms of attack. In addition, women experienced the trauma of losing male family members and

relatives in times of armed conflict. In short, women bore a disproportionately large share of burden of conflict, but had a marginal say in matters of war and peace. In spite of all international efforts, women are most vulnerable victims of armed conflicts. Women and women's organizations can be effective social agents to resolve strife and conflict. However, their potential in this regard remains unexplored and underutilized.

There are numerous examples, of national, regional and international women's organizations and movements with a primary focus on peace or disarmament. Women took to a number of peaceful-building activities at both formal and informal levels. This article looks at the contribution of women in peace initiatives in India and Japan and highlights women's peace movements in these two countries as time-tested cases evincing antidotal potential to contain terrorism and militarism frequenting the modern world.

Women as Peace Negotiators

Women's rights and empowerment fundamentally predicate on maintenance of peace and security. Indian social activist Ritu Menon says, "woman have a stake in peace, not because they are mothers and nurturers, but because they know oppression, and they know the causes of violence. They have a firsthand experience of the connected forms of domestic, communal and political violence.... feminist culture of peace fundamentally critiques structures of domination and is built on learning to live with difference, without aggression" (Times of India, 2001). Women's historical exclusion from structures of power, both private and public, and their experience of subjugation gives them a stake in working for peace, justice and democracy, for it is only through all the three that woman will be able to realize their right for equality. Women's role in preserving social order cannot be overlooked without serious consequences to peace. Sustainable peace could hardly be achieved if the experiences and perspectives of fifty percent of population were not given the attention they deserved.

While there are several instances of peace movements spearheaded by womenfolk from many parts of the world, women from the Orient have assiduously strived to transform local, national and global communities through non-violent means.

Why the Orient?

A deferential respect for gender equality is endemic in the Orient. Women power in the Orient is rooted in strong traditional bonds traceable to 'family' as an institution, right from the medieval times which survives even today as a strong institution. Peoples of the Orient repose trust and confidence in women's ability to deal with tasks of 'caring and sharing', in other words, in their familial as well as the larger societal roles. Women strived to transform local, national and global communities through non-violent means. Tolerance, love and sacrifice, archetypical to womenfolk are the key traits manifest in women power, a kind of invisible 'social capital'. It has immense potential that can be effectively tapped to overcome violence and channeled into peace initiatives.

Historically, the Orient has a prolific record of women participating in peace movements. The Japanese, the Indians, and for that matter most other Asians, imbued with traditional respect for womanhood are in the vanguard of movements, creating opportunities in spheres hitherto regarded as exclusive male

preserves. In the post-War era, while Japan symbolized an unswerving bastion of peace, India showed the path of non-violence to rest of the world in its freedom struggle against the British. While Japanese womenfolk adopted peace (and disarmament) as an end in itself, Indian women demonstrated in their support to non-violence, a means to an end.

Japan and India have a strong tradition of women's peace activism and peace campaigning. Behind the Japanese and the Indian successes in peace movements were women of sterner stuff who demonstrated leadership, courage and political maturity in far greater measure than their counterparts would have, in resolving vexatious problems. They combined patience, love and sacrifice with courage and astute diplomacy in rallying around causes and tempering fiercely polarizing forces nationally and internationally. In critical times, they took the bull by its horn and steadfastly advocated moderate middle paths, not extremism and aggression.

The rise of women to highest political power in South and South East Asian countries, some of them making a mark in international affairs is typical, and is no freak of history. Starting from Vijayalakshmi Pundit, there is a galaxy of star performers from Asia, in national and international political arena of the times. Sri Lanka and India were the first to show the way in this respect ensconcing Sirimavo Bandaranaike and Indira Gandhi as Prime Ministers, followed by Sheikh Hasina Begum and Khaleda Zia of Bangladesh, Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan, Corazon Aquino and Gloria Macapagal Arroyo of Philippines, Aung San Suu Kyi (Nobel Peace Prize winner) of Myanmar, Chandrika Kumaratunga of Sri Lanka and Megawati Sukarnoputri of Indonesia -- all wielding the highest political power. Most of these women politicians, celebrities in their own right, were eminent defenders of peace and non-violence rather than war and aggression [Lakshmi, 2020]. While the circumstances under which they came into power differ from country to country, a study of contemporary social psychology should reveal how the role of gender reached its crescendo with the rise to eminence of these celebrated women politicians.

Japanese Women's Peace Activism

During centuries of feudalism and civil war, Japanese women have been considered inferior to men according to the Confucian philosophy. When Japan abandoned feudalism in late nineteenth century, the growing militarism joined the remnants of feudalism as the exploitative milieu for women. Against this background of inequality and oppression, Japanese women enthusiastically welcomed their new rights under post-War democratic constitution, using them to struggle against any revival of militarism.

The Japanese had had with them the horror of war to the very marrow of their bones. The war-time nuclear bombings and subsequent nuclear arms race have profoundly affected the role of women in post-war Japanese peace movement. The post-war Japanese ethos was "no more shall we tolerate the cruelty and inhumanity of militarism and war".

The American occupation of Japan helped to prepare way for what was to become the powerful Japanese Anti-Nuclear Peace Movement of the post occupation period. This resistance began largely with a few women writers, poets, survivors such as Sadako Kushiwara, Shinoe Shoda and Yoko Ohta from Hiroshima, and Sumako Fukuda from Nagasaki. These women writers, through their writings, warned the world of dangers of nuclearism and horrors of nuclear weaponry.

Shinoe Shoda published 150 copies of a Book of Poems secretly and illegally through a friend working in the Hiroshima prison. She personally distributed them to other survivors giving them hope and encouragement by articulating their pain and assisting in their grief. In March 1946, Sadako Kushiara, in partnership with her husband, attempted to publish a collection of writings and poems on Atomic Bomb experience. The work was published (after a great deal of American government resistance) in a softer version, omitting over criticism of America, but still making its contribution to building of a resistance movement. On 02 October 1949, at a public meeting, it was again a woman who proposed an emergency resolution appealing to world to abolish all atomic weapons, which was unanimously passed. This was considered to be the real birth of Anti-Nuclear Peace Movement in Japan.

Soon after the American test of Hydrogen Bomb at Bikini Atoll on 01 March 1954, it was again a small study group of women comprising housewives in the Suginami Ward of Tokyo, who made a petition to all nuclear-armed States demanding the total abolition of production, stockpiling, use or testing of nuclear weapons, which snowballed into a nationwide movement. Such demonstration of far reaching and unforeseen consequences is considered as the first mass movement in Japanese history was initiated at the grass-root level by ordinary women. This movement drew nationwide public support and empathy with the plight of the survivors. It was regarded as a significant step in the survivors' psychological rehabilitation and enabled them to take an important leadership role in the peace movement.

The 1977 Annual World Conference on Atomic Bombs and Hydrogen Bombs included a wide range of women's groups such as the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), the Women Voters' League and a federation of women's groups called the "Fudanren", an affiliate of the Women's International Democratic Federation. The common concern of these women's organizations is to keep Japan from ever being involved in another war and to prevent nuclear war in general, because it threatens the very survival of humankind. Polls show that women oppose increases in military expenditures and deployment of new weapons more frequently than men (Brock-Utne, 1985).

The Pacific Campaign for Disarmament and Security (PCDS) is an information, education and support network working for a non-military security framework for the Asia-Pacific region. A peace fund provided a grant to support the holding of a forum in late 1997 in Yokohama, Japan on the above said topic. Japanese women have organized against nuclear testing and they set up a peace camp at the base of Mount Fuji. The leading light in Japanese peace saga is Sadako Ogata, the then Head of the United Nations' Commissioner for Refugees.

On 05 August 2000, more than 1800 women met in Hiroshima to call for abolition of nuclear weapons who heard from women world over, about implications of the use and testing of nuclear weapons. Then they urged, "on opening the door of twenty-first century, we the women of Japan, make a sincere appeal for women and peoples around the world to unite in efforts to abolish nuclear weapons to save the human race from destruction" (The UN 2001). The campaign named, 'Women's Forum 2000: Away with Nuclear Weapons' called upon all members-States of the UN to take decision to eliminate nuclear weapons. Besides raising awareness, Japanese women maintained constant vigil on their government policies, ready to take action.

Indian Women's Peace Activism

In the preservation and propagation of peace, Indian women have been playing a great role. In Indian mythology woman has a unique and exalted role. She is described 'Adi Shakti' -- the primordial, most powerful being. The Goddess of War and the Goddess of Peace have taken female form. Both are manifestations of the same deity, 'Durga' the symbol of both. In 'Chandi', she is worshipped not only as the Goddess of War but also the Goddess of Peace. Sanskrit verses eulogize Durga, "Yaa Devi Sarvabhuteshu Shanti Rupena Sanmsthita, Namastasmay, Namastasmay, Namastasmay Namonamah" [Obseissance to the Universal Mother who is the manifestation of Peace]. It is the mind of same personality that acts in both forms – the fierce and the peaceful; that is the mind of women everywhere.

India's woman Prime Minister Indira Gandhi has been raising a strong voice against arms race. She decried global arms race and made fervent appeals to the Superpowers (for their rival build-up in the Indian Ocean during the seventies) to declare Indian Ocean a 'Zone of Peace'. That India stands for complete elimination of nuclear weapons was repeatedly declared by her. India's nuclear energy program was totally dedicated to development and utilization of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.

Women from India or Pakistan have been involved in national workshops in either country (Chhachhi, 1996). In 1989, a South Asian Feminist Declaration further strengthened linkage and more and more women groups have been drawn into the process which highlighted the threat of nuclear holocaust in the region. It also points out how war-toys, daily violence on TV and in films, created a militarized culture which makes brutalized relationship a 'normal' way of life.

During the fourth World Women Conference in 1995 in Huiarou, a small mountain resort town, Indian women set up a Peace tent --"Caught in the crossfire, Women against Militarization" -- an exhibition with testimonies of Kashmiri women from the valley and refugee camps in Jammu and Delhi (Chhachhi, 1996). They also conducted a peace march alongside Pakistani women, with a demand to look for a democratic solution for peace in the valley and subcontinent.

Women in India and Pakistan attempted to overcome the divisiveness and hostility between governments have been involved in national workshops in either country. The links built between women in both countries has also led to joint intervention in the border peace movements, a forum for other peace initiatives. In the Lahore Convention of the Pakistan-India Forum for Peace and Democracy (PIFPD) in November 1995, a resolution was adopted urging "the governments and civil societies of India and Pakistan undertake measures to counter adverse affects of foreign and domestic policies of militaristic nature on the daily life of citizens, and an increasing sense of insecurity in the two countries. The resolution further demanded:

- (a) The Governments of India and Pakistan should dismantle and refrain from installing weapons of war as national monuments.
- (b) Wasteful expenditure on military parades and exhibition of military hardware should be stopped; and
- (c) A citizen monitoring group be set up to monitor hate producing and sexist images of war and military prowess in the media" (Grover & Arora, 1998). The resolution was passed unanimously.

In 1995, a number of the participants from the 1986 meeting gathered at Dhulikhel in Nepal and formed a South Asian Women's Peace Bahini to focus on militarism and violence in civil society in the region. The Women's Organization for Rural Development works with landless agricultural labor in Tamil Nadu. Through training, rallies and publication of materials, the group helps to raise awareness of the danger of nuclear weapons and their testing. Emphasis is laid on the need to redirect government expenditures from defense and weapons research and production towards increased spending for education and health.

On 25 March 2000, a delegation of 39 women from India, under the banner of Women's Initiatives for Peace in South Asia (WIPSA) visited Pakistan. They called on then Pakistan Chief Executive Gen. Musharraf and urged him to open a dialogue with India (*The Hindu*, 2000). The team was led by Mohini Giri, former chief of the National Commission for Women and Nirmala Deshpande, noted Gandhian, among others. They sat across the table and discussed with their counter-parts crucial issues that divided the two countries in a day-long seminar. In reciprocation, Asma Jehangir, former chairperson of the National Human Rights Commission in Pakistan, led a Pakistani women delegation, all activists of the WIPSA, visited New Delhi on 02 May 2000. They urged the Indian government to "negotiate the Kashmir issue with the military regime in Pakistan" and sent the message that the only way to reduce tension was to hold negotiations with Musharraf (*The Hindu*, 2000).

As more and more women involve in peace initiatives expand, the possibility of a different and better world increases. Women need protection as they are the nations most valuable possession, the principal vehicle for transmitting the nations values, bearers of future generations, are most vulnerable, defilement and are most susceptible to assimilation. Some of these ideas may contribute towards building a better future for humankind in the new millennium. More so, this may help in future research on health and environmental consequences of military vs civilian nuclear production. It is hoped both India and Japan so too Pakistan governments will join the efforts of the nations aimed at pressurizing the US into fulfilling its commitment towards dismantling of nukes made and international law. Hopefully, vigilance about war preparations, opposition to nuclear weapons, international border conflicts and ethnic conflicts will soon become a common concern and point of action of women in India, Japan and other countries of Asia.

Conclusion

In spite of all the barriers of gender discrimination, women's interest in peace has been powerful. Women have been highly visible in the forefront of movements for nonviolence and peace worldwide. There is a need for participation of womenfolk in decision processes critical to war and peace through greater gender equity and inclusion.

Women are active negotiators, able to see clearly and differently the issues affecting women. For women world over, peace and security ultimately connote having a safe or violence-free home, and as a logical corollary, a safe violence-free society and nation or region at large. Lately women have become increasingly effective participants at the peace-table and had continued to assist in creating an enabling environment for conflict -prevention, peacemaking, and peace-building and post conflict reconstruction. Sustainable peace could hardly be achieved if the experiences and perspectives of some five percent of

the population were not given the attention they deserved. Indeed, it is time that a gender-dimension in peacekeeping got incorporated in the UN Charter.

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