Survival Guides

"Women are not helpless instruments
to be used by men…"

In the Valley, Women Paramedics with a Healing Touch

Aditi Bhaduri

Budgam (Jammu & Kashmir): It was just another mundane day for Munira Manzoor until a knock on the door changed her life. That moment marked her journey of transformation: from being a school drop-out, she became a respected paramedic in her village of Zuhama, in Kashmir's Budgam district.

The year was 1997. The Valley was in the throes of armed insurgency and the health care system, especially in the remote areas of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, was in a shambles. "Most of the doctors, who were from the minority Hindu community, had fled Kashmir, and both the government and private health care facilities were in a poor state. Even the treatment of small injuries was not possible since the paramedics were too scared to step out of their homes. This severely affected women, particularly pregnant women. The nearest maternity home was at Lal Ded Hospital, Srinagar, and for people in remote villages, it took an impossibly long time to reach the hospital since they had to stop at army check posts every now and then," recalled Munira, who is in her mid-thirties.

This crisis in health care deeply disturbed Dr. Ali Mohamed Mir, a retired IAS officer. He wanted to do something about it. So he collaborated with the J&K Voluntary Health and Development Association (J&K VHDA) and decided to reach out to the villages most deprived of health care. Ten villages in Budgam, seven in Pulwama and five in Khansaab, a block near the border, were adopted.

In the beginning, the J&K VHDA organised out patient departments (OPDs) for administering first aid. But it was observed that women were very reluctant to get themselves treated by male doctors and paramedics. That is when it was

decided that if the basic health care needs of the women of the Valley were to be met in some small measure, a team of local women paramedics needed to be set up. That was how Mir found himself going from door-to-door in these villages, asking women and girls to volunteer; and that was how Munira suddenly found herself undergoing training in basic health care, natal care, and later, even in post-trauma counselling.

While the J&K VHDA conducted OPDs, they simultaneously trained the volunteers. As a Class IX drop-out, Munira had never thought that she would one day be able to make such a valuable contribution to her community, but when Mir presented her with the opportunity, she instantly agreed to join up. "I learnt about antenatal and post-natal care. I underwent training – gradually – and began by going from home to home to register pregnant women," she recalled. She was also taught how to talk to women about basic health care, nutrition and even trimester care.

All this was not easy to do under the shadow of militancy. Munira undertook this work at great personal risk – as did Haseena Begum and, later, Sakeena Shafi, Safeena, and many others. According to these women, although they felt insecure, they were able to undergo training and help local women because caregiving was regarded as non-political work. Mir's daughter, Ezabar Ali, who conducted the training sessions, observed, "To make our working transparent, we conducted all our meetings in the open so that the entire village would know what the volunteers were doing."

Yet, despite the open attitude adopted by Ezabar and her team, as well as the volunteers, they faced a lot of opposition, and even ridicule, when the time came to step into the homes of friends and neighbours. Recalled Sakeena Shafi of Gundi Maqsood village, "Initially, people laughed at me. They would poke fun, saying, 'Look, the doctor has come'." She had just passed Class 10 when she attended her first J&K VHDA medical camp and decided to undergo training as a paramedic. Her family was supportive and she finally became a volunteer in

1999. At first, it hurt when people mocked her, but Sakeena stood firm and attitudes gradually began to change as people understood the benefits of such an intervention.

Eventually, Sakeena became indispensable for the pregnant women in her village and an expert advisor when it came to antenatal and post-natal care. She also talked to local women about family planning and occasionally helped train other volunteers as well. 'Dais', or traditional birth attendants, were one such category of volunteers who received training in basic hygiene – like using hot water and clean sheets while delivering babies. The use of medical kits was also explained to them.

Safeena, a volunteer from Zuhama village, was also thrilled at getting the opportunity to help her people. Inspired by Munira to undergo training, she proved particularly effective in reaching out to emotionally disturbed women, some on the brink of nervous breakdowns.

Owing to the decades of violence, trauma counselling and mental health care have emerged as huge concerns in Kashmir. Scores of mothers whose sons disappeared or were killed by the militants or security agencies have suffered immeasurable distress. Wives have had husbands remain untraceable for years and find themselves trying to cope with the pressures of loneliness and uncertainty every moment of their lives. Today, although the level of violence has come down, unemployment and other social problems have given rise to high levels of domestic violence and this, in turn, is a significant factor in undermining the mental well-being of women and children.

Many women in far-flung villages have had to suffer domestic violence in silence for years. But now, in volunteer-counsellors like Safeena, they find a sympathetic ear. For instance, Magli, 70, who lost a young son to militants and suffered from acute depression, found someone with whom she could converse when Safeena started visiting her regularly. Although Magli initially resisted the idea of talking to a stranger, she gradually opened up. Safeena also advised her

on taking some simple medication for her insomnia and Magli slowly began to recover some of her old composure.

While local women have benefited from these enterprising volunteers, the volunteers too have gained greatly from the experience. Besides the increased confidence and respect they now command within their own homes and communities, Munira pointed out that she and her colleagues are also more aware of women's health needs as well as their rights. "We had no idea about immunisation and we learnt of its importance during the training. Young girls reach puberty here with little inkling about personal hygiene. Once we counselled them, the situation improved. After all, even as mothers we did not earlier have a sense of the changes our bodies undergo and the care we need to take," she elaborated.

Understanding domestic violence also proved to be an eye-opener. The rise of domestic violence has been specifically connected to the series of 'hartals' and 'bandhs' (shut-downs) Kashmir has been witnessing. Since most of these bandhs are called by separatists who are accountable to no one, people are too afraid to oppose them. "Hartals lead to loss of wages and many of our men are daily wage earners," revealed Munira. According to her, such situations only increase the frustration of local men and they give vent to it by attacking their wives and, sometimes, their children. Sometimes, Munira has had to intervene personally and rescue those who had no idea about how to deal with such displays of anger and bitterness from close family members.

In 2011, there were over fifty active women health volunteers in Budgam, Pulwama, Baramullah and Srinagar. Besides the health care they deliver, they have emerged as icons for the local people. They have also had the unexpected effect of raising the status of the girl child. "Earlier, most families sent only their sons to school. But after seeing our work, they are paying attention to their daughters. They can see that girls too can play a role in the development of families and the community," explained Safeena.

6,300ft Above Sea Level, A Kashmir School Helps Girls Reach for the Sky

Anjali Singh

Rajouri (Jammu & Kashmir): Nestled 6,300 feet above sea level, surrounded by dense forests, is Govind High School of Pichnar village near Kotranka town, which is about sixty kilometres northeast of Rajouri district in Jammu & Kashmir. It is a unique institution located in a troubled region, and testifies to the principle that no matter the situation, no matter the conflict, local children must be allowed to access education to ensure their health and well-being.

Rajouri has been the site of insurgency for decades. But tucked away in its isolated location, Govind High School carries on with its mandate of providing good education to local children, especially girls, and has emerged as one of the most popular educational institutions in the region.

Both the school administration and students have learnt to take the spectre of violence in their stride. During our visit to the school in 2011, Afzal Mohammed, the headmaster, said, "The school stands close to an army 'chowki' (army post), yet the students are not affected by the threat of violence. They are more focused on building a future for themselves. I have not seen any student terrified of coming to school for fear of terror attacks. Even demonstrations and agitations in places like Srinagar have had no impact here. Since we are situated in such a remote area, information related to the conflict hardly trickles down to us."

A significant aspect of this institution is that it has over 200 students, but what makes it even more special is that more than half of each class comprises girls, who come from the villages that surround Kotranka town. It takes two hours or more of non-stop walking for some of them to reach the school, but fuelled by their dreams, these young women put up with

the tough terrain and inclement weather to clock in at 10 a.m. every school day.

What came as pleasant surprise to Mohammed when he became headmaster in May 2010 was to find that nobody complained about the lack of facilities, least of all the students. When he got to know them better, he was touched to hear stories about how most of them – especially the girls – travelled such long distances to school without a murmur.

Talking to the students confirmed the headmaster's observations. Said Zarina Begum, 15, from Kha village, who was studying in Class X, "We just love school, because it brings the wider world to us. Education is the only way girls can experience change. I want to be a teacher so that I can help other girls step out of their homes. We live in such a remote place that it takes me two to three hours to reach school, but I come with a few other girls from my village. We walk as a group for safety's sake."

One of the younger among five siblings, Zarina's intelligence was clearly discernible. When asked whether she would be able to stand up to a male-dominated society, she replied quickly, "*Ladkon ke saath mil ke desh ke liye kaam karenge, aur accha naam karenge* (we will work together with the boys for the good of the country and make our village proud)."

Shakuntala Devi, 14, from Kanthol village, who was in Class IX, believed that she was particularly lucky and went on to explain why: "I am the first of the daughters in my family to come to a school. Luckily, my parents agreed to send me to this school though it is so far away. My three elder sisters were not allowed to come, so I know how important this education is for me." Did it not bother her that she had to wake up early every day and trudge for two hours, crossing jungles and bad roads, to reach school? "No. I love to study science, which is being taught here. So I come to school however long it may take me. I want to be a doctor," revealed the youngster.

With religious fundamentalists coming down hard on educating girls in Kashmir, one would have imagined that

these girls would be apprehensive about schooling. But retorted Shakuntala, "We have no electricity, no proper roads, no system of health care and no clean drinking water. I think these problems are far bigger for us than the diktat of militants."

Truly, these girls came across as determined youngsters endowed with a strong will to rise above their circumstances. Their life is certainly no easy ride. Most villages in this region have no electricity or proper civic amenities, and the families are generally large, with eight or nine children. Given the number of hungry mouths to feed, education is a luxury for most households. Girls, especially, have a rough time, because many families believe that the more hands there are to keep the home running, the better. Early marriage is also the practice here, with many women having their first child in their teens.

Given this scenario, the importance of a school like Govind High School is obvious. If it had not existed, life would have been very different for many of its young students. The school has ensured that the fundamental right to education is upheld, even under inhospitable circumstances.

Said Afzal Mohammed, "These children have the zeal to make something out of life and I realised that it was a privilege to be able to teach them. They taught me that it is a teacher who has the power to help realise a child's dream of becoming a doctor, engineer, pilot or soldier. So I decided to make sure that I would try my best to ensure that these children get the facilities to study better."

The principal was well aware that the facilities at the institution were in need of an upgrade. "When I took over, I was taken aback to see that the school was functioning with only five staff members as against the required strength of twenty. There was also a dearth of buildings to house the classes properly," he said. According to Mohammed's assessment, the complex needed at least seven more buildings if it was to function properly, and making the right improvements was very much in the sights of the principal and his five colleagues. The school had no science lab,

playgrounds or even library. Many posts of Class IV employees (tertiary staff) are lying vacant. But things had started changing in 2011. Said the principal, "After we met education officials and described the poor state of the school, we got one more building under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, taking the total count upto four. Even the 60th Rashtriya Rifles, posted at Rajouri, pitched in with furniture and sports equipment, thanks to some helpful officers. So things are beginning to look up."

What remains the biggest challenge, however, is ensuring that the girls of Class X get to take their Higher Secondary Board Examinations every year. This is a hurdle that entails travelling a distance of thirty to thirty-five kilometres to reach Dangri, a town even farther than Rajouri, where the examination centres are located. Yet, each year they have managed to make sure that no student misses an examination, according to seventeen-year-old Mohammed Bashir, who had himself passed out of this school and now keenly watches his nine-year-old sister make her way through it.

Bashir is a wise young man who has realised how important schooling for girls is in this remote region. He firmly stated, "It is only when girls are educated that our village can find a place for itself in the world. So girls here have to go and take their examinations, even if they have to change three buses to reach the centre. There are many hardships we face in the villages, especially when someone falls ill. The nearest hospital is miles away. So if our sisters can study and become doctors and teachers, it will only help the rest of us."

Azamgarh's Women Fight Stigma and Stereotypes

Kulsum Mustafa

Azamgarh (Uttar Pradesh): The village of Sanjarpur in the Azamgarh district of Uttar Pradesh has had a terror tag attached to it ever since the police encounter that took place

in Batla House in Delhi's Jamia Nagar, on September 19, 2008. Atif Amin, one of the two young men killed in that encounter, was from this village, as was Ariz Khan, picked up by the police after the encounter. Several other youth on the police's 'wanted' list are from this village too.

A visit to Sanjarpur, a year and eight months after the Batla House encounter, revealed how deeply the incident had impacted life here. The women of Sanjarpur had not celebrated any festival since then; neither had they taken the same pleasure in dressing up or applying henna on their hands and feet, as they had earlier. When they spoke about their lives, they expressed only one desire: to get justice for their children, restore peace and bring tranquility back into "hearts and hearths".

While adversity had devastated them, it was apparent that, in a way, it had also helped these 'purdahnashi' (veiled) women – most of them illiterate – to rediscover their inner strength. The spirit to fight back against what they termed an "injustice", an attempt to malign their community and, above all, a planned strategy to prevent the progress of their children, was very evident, even as they unanimously condemned terrorist acts.

While the men in the village had stepped back, intimidated by the security forces, local women emerged as the emotional bedrock of their families. Adopting a two-pronged strategy, they were working towards bringing some normalcy back into their homes at the same time as trying to gain more information about the law through legal awareness sessions conducted by the Association for Advocacy and Legal Initiative (AALI), a Lucknow-based non-governmental organisation which came to Sanjarpur at the initiative of Tariq Saif, a local social activist.

AALI had decided to fight the criminal cases of the Sanjarpur youth and also empower community women by holding exclusive all-women monthly sessions on law and human rights in the village. Elaborating on their work in Sanjarpur, Shubi Dwividi, Programme Officer, AALI, said, "We advocate and

work for issues and concerns of women, especially those involving minority and deprived communities." According to her, AALI had developed strategies to support the Muslim community in Sanjarpur to stand up against state oppression and social defamation. "We want to ensure that guilt is not established at the cost of the innocent," she said.

Needless to say, this was a principle this eastern Uttar Pradesh village wanted to establish, and no one was more conscious of the need to do so than its women. "By ensuring that the food is cooked, the house is cleaned and clothes are washed we do try to pretend that everything is fine. But we know this is not enough. We need legal know-how," said Rahat, an aunt of Arif, a suspected terrorist currently lodged in a Gujarat prison.

Rahat, a divorcée in her mid-thirties and a victim of domestic violence, may have had severe hearing impairment and a loss of 70 per cent of her vision, but she said her physical disabilities would never come in the way of her fight for justice. In fact, she was one of the most enthusiastic supporters and participants of the legal empowerment initiative.

AALI started work here in November 2008 and quickly made its way into the hearts of local women. Through advocacy, it raised the issue at various levels. It also helped them form defence committees, comprising lawyers and others, to ensure that the rule of law, natural justice and an adequate defence would be made available to them.

"Behind their veils they are all holed up. They need to open up, speak out. This will reduce the pain," remarked Sehba Syed, a former AALI member, who has worked in Sanjarpur. Dwividi agreed with this assessment: "This is very true, which is why we came up with the idea of mental health camps."

A walk through the dusty village lanes only strengthened one's belief that psychiatric support was absolutely vital for these distraught women who refused to believe in the guilt of their relatives. Shamsa, Arif's eldest sister, was convinced that her brother had been framed. "He is innocent and he has been made a scapegoat. How could a boy who could not see a

chicken being slaughtered have had a hand in a blast that killed innocent people?" she asked. Arif's mother, Farzana Begum, too, was inconsolable, even though her tears had run dry after weeks of having cried herself to sleep. She sat near the window, head bent, cutting vegetables. Though the black 'dupatta' covering her head partially fell over her face, it failed to hide the deep circles under her eyes and the lines of sorrow that were etched on her face. "After the initial few days of inactivity, when she seemed to have lost the will to live, 'Ammi' (mother) took stock of herself. Now, she does all the household chores just like before, but that is just a façade. She keeps looking through the window, from where she last bid 'khuda hafiz' (goodbye) to Arif," said Shamsa.

The scene at slain youngster Atif Amin's house was even more heart-rending. An eerie silence hung over the house. It seemed almost like an eternity before the gate was opened and entry inside was allowed most reluctantly. "Ammi is very ill. She has been hospitalised. Only we sisters are at home," said Tabish, Atif's sister, quietly.

"Life will never be the same again for us, we can never come to terms with Atif's death. He was the youngest of five siblings, the darling of the family, so helpful, so nice, even to total strangers. He was always helping anyone who was new to Delhi..." Tabish's voice broke off and soon she was sobbing loudly. Beenish, the eldest sister, consoled her, "We will have to learn to live without him. This is our destiny."

The stigma of terror had not only eclipsed the lives of these families but put a blot on the future of the youth growing up to be young men here. Just the mere fact that they hailed from Azamgarh was enough to invite suspicion. While the humiliation of being ostracised chilled their souls, the prospect of a bleak future stared them in the face.

"We have to constantly remind ourselves that this is all a bad dream," said the mother of Yusuf Ali. The software engineer, who worked in Noida, near Delhi, has been rendered jobless because his employer and landlord both showed him the door. His only fault: he was from Azamgarh. Mohammed

Nasir, another software engineer based in Gurgaon, quit his job and went back to tilling his paddy fields. Nasir's frightened parents had urged him to come back home after the Batla House incident.

"Azamgarhis are being thrown out of jobs and accommodation on flimsy grounds," said Tariq, who is fearful that most parents here, out of fear and insecurity, may stop sending their wards out for studies and employment or may, like Nasir's parents, pressurise them to return home. "It took so many years for Muslims here to accept that education is the only way forward for them, the only way of being part of the mainstream, but once again they have been forced to change their minds. This is a grave situation," he commented. Yet, along with a few like-minded youngsters, Tariq made up his mind to fight this trend by motivating women to send their children back to school and out to seek jobs.

Azamgarh needs to re-imagine itself. It needs to be infused with a fresh zeal for life. The task is difficult and requires consistent effort. But women here know that the onus of restoring peace ultimately lies on them. It is they who will ensure whether their community remains in the mainstream or get pushed to the margins.

One woman from the village described what it felt like: "It's like walking on live coals." But people here also know that what they do today will help put the past behind them and build a future for their children.

Illness and Debility Can't Stop Manipur's Meira Paibis

Anjulika Thingnam

Imphal (Manipur): The ongoing conflict in the north-eastern state of Manipur, that has stretched over six decades, has affected generations of women in many direct and indirect

ways. Health has been a natural casualty in this region, where even something as basic as clean drinking water is scarce. In many areas, people use either pond water or river water, neither of which is free from contamination and which perpetuates water-borne diseases. There has also been a substantial increase in malaria cases, said to have risen from 708 in 2008 to 1,069 in 2009: an increase of 51 per cent. Tuberculosis is another widespread problem, and with significant numbers of people living with HIV / AIDS in the state, it is not surprising that the HIV-TB co-infection is also manifesting itself.

According to Dr. M. Akshayakumar Singh, head of the Department of Clinical Psychology at the Regional Institute of Medical Sciences in Imphal, Manipur's state capital, social tensions and violence related to the armed conflict are affecting the average person both mentally and physically. "Fear, anxiety, tension, stress and depression are the most prominent effects seen, manifested physiologically as palpitations, ulcers, colitis, irregular bowel movements, dizziness, headache, backache and many other social diseases such as diabetes," he said.

Those on the frontlines of the struggle for justice in this region have lived with deteriorating health for years. Take the Meira Paibis – "torchbearers" – a women's group that has a presence in almost all nine districts of the state. The group is actively engaged in fighting rights violations, whether perpetrated by local people or security personnel.

Phanjoubam Sakhi, 75, one of the pioneering leaders of the Meira Paibis, has worked tirelessly for almost as long as armed conflict has raged in her state. Recalled Sakhi, "I must have been around forty when I first started involving myself in the movement. My youngest child was around thirteen years then."

The Meira Paibi movement originally began as a "*nishabandi*", or prohibition, movement during the 1970s. "At night, I would open the cupboard as casually as possible, stealthily take out the clothes I would wear the next day and

keep them by my pillow, to stop my husband from suspecting that I was about to set out early the next morning on Meira Paibi work. On my return, I would peek at the house from the gate and sneak in when he was not around," Sakhi recalled with an impish smile.

The years of work she has put in have earned her the epithet 'Ima' – mother. But being so honoured has come at great personal cost and sacrifice. "We would set out at dawn without food. With the few ten-rupee notes that lay at the bottom of our purses, how could we buy food? At most we could only afford some snacks, but in interior Manipur, even these were not available," Sakhi recounted. Such lives of uncertainty inevitably took a toll on the women's health. "Our circumstances affected our health a lot," said Sakhi, who is the president of the All Manipur Kanba Ima Lup (AMKIL), one of the prominent statewide Meira Paibi organisations.

It's not just Sakhi who is suffering. Most Meira Paibi women complain of gastritis, insomnia, dizzy spells, anxiety and fatigue. "During the peak of agitations, we go to bed, yet lie awake unable to sleep for hours, thinking about what could be the best course of action," Sakhi said, adding humorously, "sometimes we think about how best to out-manoeuvre the police and stop them from trying to arrest us."

Like Sakhi, Ima Gyaneshori, 60, AMKIL's publicity secretary, has her share of health problems. "I have been a diabetic since 1994, much before I became involved in Meira Paibi work, she said. "So, the frequent irregularity of food intake during the agitations can be very bad for me. Yet, I cannot forego my work as it has become part of my life's purpose." She said she and her colleagues have kept going only by the exercise of sheer will. "We usually derive the strength to go on from within ourselves. But, at times, after a campaign would come to an end, my whole body would ache and I would be bedridden with fatigue and dizziness," she revealed.

Their campaigns are by no means easy. Take the Sharmila Kanba Lup, a support group formed by a few senior Meira Paibis. They take turns in staying overnight in a small lean-to,

walled by bamboo mats, on the side of Porompat road in Imphal East district, a few metres away from the state-run JN Hospital where Irom Sharmila is being kept under judicial custody and force-fed.

Nongthongbam Nupimacha, 62, of the All Manipur Women Social Reformation and Development Samaj, has observed these vigils very often. When we met her in 2011, she estimated that she may have slept at her own home for just a night or two over the last two years.

Another activist, Ima L. Gyaneshori, 60, said she always carries a pack of biscuits in her bag to counter any fluctuations in her blood sugar levels. She also makes sure that her blood pressure medication is always on hand, a precaution that has become essential ever since she actively participated in the relay hunger strike for Sharmila, who herself has been on over a decade-long indefinite fast for the repeal of the controversial Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958.

Dizziness and back pain are constant complaints for Ima Soibam Momon, 67. President of the All Manipur Tammi Chingmi Apunba Nupi Lup, another prominent Meira Paibi organisation, Momon has developed some indigenous healing techniques to overcome them. "We have so many health complaints, so we burn incense, pray, and apply aloe vera pulp on our heads. Yoga also helps," she averred.

Grace Shatsang, 59, former president of the Naga Women's Union, Manipur and presently on its advisory committee, believed that the impact of her work as a peace-builder is more dependent on her mental rather than physical health, "My work involves a lot of travelling and constant brainstorming, but it is the psychological stress that is wearing me down." Shatsang hasn't had a health check-up in over three years because there just hasn't been any time.

Agitations and protest movements are everyday occurrences in Manipur given the high levels of violence in the state. According to media reports, in 2009, as many as 235 people were killed between January and April alone. There have been times when years of pent-up tension, frustration

and fury has manifested in raw emotion. The nude protest by twelve Meira Paibi women in 2004, against the extra-judicial rape and by Assam Rifles personnel killing of Thangjam Manorama, a young woman alleged to be a member of an underground group, was one such moment. Explained Dr. Singh, "Exposing their naked bodies in front of the Kangla Fort was the culmination of days of mental disquiet. Tensions ran so high that they did something that was beyond all thought."

Lourembam Nganbi, 60, vice-president of the Bishnupur district unit of AMKIL, recalled that moment: "We gathered at the gate, spread out the banners, and then swiftly shed our clothes. We could not hear or see anything else except our furious voices. We were in a trance-like state." She, along with Momon and Gyaneshori, were among the twelve mothers who had participated in that protest.

The impact of conflict on the health of peace-builders and human rights activists is rarely highlighted, much less understood. But, going by the accounts of the Meira Paibi women, its impacts are deep and long-lasting.

Fighting for Gender Rights in Manipur's Centre of Violence

Ninglun Hanghal

Churachandpur (Manipur): Manipur is no different from the usual conflict zone where it is women who bear the brunt of chaos and bloodshed. While Manipuri women have been at the receiving end of pain and suffering for years now, they have also learnt to come together against all violence, whether triggered by the State's security forces or by militant groups. While the work of women's organisations like the Imphal-based Meira Paibis is well known, there are many small local

organisations in other parts of the state that are also responding with courage.

One of these is the Hmar Women's Association (HWA), a group formed by women of the Hmar tribal community, in Lamka, the headquarters of Churachandpur district. In the many years that it has been working to fight atrocities against women, the year 2006 was a watershed. When its members learnt from media reports in early 2006 that around twenty-five women – many of them still in their teens – had been tortured, molested and sexually harassed by so-called 'underground outfits' in villages like Parbung, Hmarkhawpui and Sipuikawn, they knew that they had to fight back.

These villages are located in the Tipaimukh sub-division of Churachandpur, which, along with four others (Henglep, Thanlon, Saikot and Samulamlan), forms the epicentre of violence in Manipur. Claimed as 'liberated zones' by insurgents, safe hide-outs for as many as thirteen insurgent groups – each alleging that they represent a community or a hill tribal group or sub-group – are located here. Even non-tribal outfits from the Manipur valley claim to have a base in this district. Security forces, like the Assam Rifles, are also deployed in the area, and many of the insurgent groups that ostensibly come under the SoO (Suspension of Operation) agreement are to be found here too.

Despite the remote location and terrible roads – it takes two days to reach these villages by jeep from Lamka – there was no stopping HWA activists in their pursuit of justice. As the year wore on, intra-ethnic violence as well as clashes between state and non-state elements had reached such a point that villagers were fleeing to neighbouring Mizoram out of sheer helplessness. Many had horrifying stories to relate about the demands made by militant outfits gunpoint. Pi J.L. Sawmi ("pi" is a prefix used locally as a mark of respect for an adult woman), the head of HWA and president of Churachandpur Joint Women's Union (CJWU), an umbrella body of various local women's groups, recalled in 2011, "During those days, the villagers would have to pay dearly if a demand or rather

command – which extended to sexual favours – was not obeyed."

As HWA heightened its protest against the Tipaimukh rapes, moving from village to village, its activists came under all kinds of threats and their lives were in danger. Said Pi Sawmi, "We received innumerable unidentified calls, but ignored them or moved about incognito." The group also faced smear campaigns – the local media were very critical of their actions and alleged that they were engineering these protests at the behest of vested interests. But that, too, did not deter HWA. "We simply issued press releases and statements in response," said Pi Sawmi, coolly.

Within days, coordinated rallies and protests were held, both in Lamka and Delhi, which forced the Manipur government to set up the Rajkhowa Commission to look into the allegations. Ironically, although the crimes involved rape, the Commission did not include any health experts, let alone women investigators. The hearings and examinations of the victims were conducted in Parbung – the headquarters of Tipaimukh – with cross-examinations being undertaken by Human Rights Alert and the Manipur Forward Youth Front, both of which are valley-based, non-tribal bodies.

Apprehensive and demoralised by the turn of events, HWA leaders went knocking on the doors of the National Commission for Women (NCW) in Delhi in May 2006. "Fortunately, they heard us out patiently. Then-chairperson, Girija Vyas, and other members took the matter seriously," elaborated Pi Sawmi. Later, NCW member and Northeast-in-Charge, Malini Bhattacharya, visited Tipaimukh and met the victims.

In her report, Bhattacharya stated that the girls who had undergone sexual assault and rape still suffered from headaches, listlessness and inability to concentrate, apart from various menstrual and urinary problems. Some reported impairment of eyesight and hearing, and there were also complaints of pain in the back and abdomen. Not surprisingly, every woman complained of living in fear. Bhattacharya also

noted the abysmal lack of health care in the area: "There was neither hospital nor doctor, only a defunct primary health centre."

A major fear among the rape survivors was of having contracted HIV/AIDS as many of their attackers were known drug-pushers. There was also the stigma attached to being raped. In light of this, on NCW's recommendation, a free medical and trauma counselling camp was held in Parbung in November 2006. This move helped. According to Pi Sawmi, many of the victims felt better psychologically, as there was a lot of sharing with the full participation of HWA members. As one woman beneficiary said at that point, "When we talk about problems that only women can relate to, like abdominal pain, we feel better."

Several of the survivors left their homes to begin life anew in Mizoram or Meghalaya. But it has been difficult to erase the past completely. According to Pi Sawmi, these women – most working as domestic help – are still "living death", their hopes of marrying and settling down to a normal life completely extinguished.

The campaign also took a lot out of HWA activists. There was limited financial and legal support for their work. "All our funds were spent on travel and most of the time it was from our pocket. While NCW members were required to be ferried by helicopter, the HWA team would leave for Lamka two days ahead in order to be there on time," revealed Pi Sawmi.

Having lived through the conflict and seen its consequences at firsthand, the activists feel that a major gap in rehabilitation is the lack of support structures for women who undergo traumatic experiences. Given the local ignorance and illiteracy, the HWA team had a tough time dealing with the parents of rape survivors, most of whom wanted to keep the issue under wraps. It was only with time that they realised the importance of speaking out. The lack of health care infrastructure was another major challenge, with the survivors not knowing where to go or whom to approach for medical assistance.

But the biggest lesson learnt was the need for local women to organise and come together, especially in a district like Churachandpur where different communities and ethnic groups live cheek-by-jowl. That was why CJWU was convened in 2005. It comprises several community-based women organisations, including HWA, Zomi Mothers' Association, Kuki Women's Association and Ima Leimaren Apunba Lup. The Union collectively resolved that any rape accused, no matter his ethnic background, should be awarded exemplary punishment.

Today, even as ethnic clashes continue to rage, CJWU has successfully intervened in several incidents. It is also exploring ways of keeping the original issue alive and is considering filing an RTI (Right to Information) petition regarding the action taken on the Rajkhowa Commission Report, which was submitted to the state government in 2007. So far, little appears to have come out of it.

Churachandpur's brave and feisty women activists want justice at all costs.

High Up in Assam's Hills, A Band of Peace Builders

Ratna Bharali Talukdar

Karbi Anglong Hills District (Assam): The nightmare that Walson Teron, 51, went through in October 2003 has marked his life forever. His twelve-year-old daughter, Prativa, was gang-raped and Teron, who belongs to the Karbi tribe and lives in Langmili village in the Karbi Anglong Hills District of Assam, had to carry her on his back across a fourteen-kilometre-long hill route to the district headquarters of Diphu to get medical assistance. While he knew his child needed immediate medical care, the traumatised father was also wondering how he could file a report at the police station.

A day earlier, while Teron and his wife were out working

in the paddy fields near their home, their daughter had been gang-raped inside it by Assam police personnel. The police had been deployed there in an area domination exercise, as part of counter-insurgency operations against the Dima Halam Daoga (DHD), an insurgent outfit that was active in the districts of both Karbi Anglong and the adjacent North Cachar Hills.

For around a decade, the United Democratic People's Solidarity (UPDS), which represents the Karbi tribe, and DHD, which fights for the interests of the Dimasa tribe, have been engaged in an ethnic turf war. Hundreds of innocent tribals have been caught in the crossfire and in the ensuing counter-insurgency exercises.

As Teron made his way to Diphu with his daughter, he was advised to meet a group of women from the Karbi Nimso Chingthur Asong (KNCA), the apex women's body of the Karbi tribe, set up in 1986. When KNCA women learnt of the atrocity – one of the endless instances of abuse that women and children experience in this conflict-ridden area – they promptly decided to help. Experienced in fighting cases for female victims of conflict and ethnic violence, the KNCA members also made immediate arrangements for Prativa's treatment at a district hospital.

They simultaneously spearheaded a movement to pressurise authorities to punish the guilty police personnel. This, however, was not an easy task. According to Kajektak Bipi, 45, President, KNCA, senior officials in the district administration tried to conceal the evidence. However, the medical report made available by Teron established conclusively that rape had indeed been committed on the minor girl, following which KNCA registered a case at the Diphu Police Station. The organisation also moved the Assam State Women Commission and the Assam Human Rights Commission in its campaign to seek justice for the child.

For Prativa, though, life was never the same again. KNCA's assistance could not spare her the social stigma that came with rape, and her poor, illiterate parents did not dare take her back home. Instead, the young victim found accommodation

as domestic help in Diphu town, in the home of a Christian priest who was kind enough to ensure that the girl went to school. Hope resurfaced when Prativa was able to identify the culprits during an identification parade. KNCA members were constantly in touch with her and her parents during this entire period. The guilty police personnel were, thereafter, dismissed from service and sent to prison.

Meanwhile, even after Teron went back home in 2003 without his daughter, trauma and misfortune continued to plague him and his family. Two years after the assault on Prativa, he, and all the residents of his village, were forced to flee their homes when an ethnic clash between DHD and UPDS flared up on October 8, 2005, in different pockets of the district. The sudden attacks immediately claimed eleven lives. The extremists burnt down fifteen villages in the area. The attack and retaliation in the entire district resulted in the deaths of over 200 people and led to the displacement of about 49,000 people belonging to both tribes. The displaced persons had to take shelter in different relief camps. In 2006, they eventually settled down in Chachear Langso village, near Diphu town, having abandoned their original Langmili village.

The new settlers of Chachear Langso did not receive any rehabilitation assistance, and it was only in 2008 that the families were allotted houses under the Indira Awaas Yojna, a government social welfare scheme that provides housing for the rural poor in India. In addition, the families were allotted one acre of land each by the local Karbi people, so that they could return to agriculture. However, for 'jhum' cultivation – the commonly practiced slash and burn technique used by tribal groups in the Northeast – they still had to go to conflict-prone Langmili.

Such have been the lived realities of the unfortunate inhabitants of Chachear Langso – and no one understands their difficulties better than KNCA members. Years of conflict have toughened its activists who are completely focused on their mission of helping and empowering the women and girls who are victims of the violence. Prativa's case is just one among

the many they have taken up. In addition to such assistance, they stand by the affected families, just as they stood by Prativa's parents when they finally found the courage to bring their daughter back home in 2008.

Even as the organisation has continued to work towards its original goal of empowering Karbi women, it has also introduced some peace-building initiatives. Through its ninety-six branches and a joint action committee with the Dimasa Welfare Society – the women's body of the Dimasas – KNCA has undertaken peace-building programmes in the entire district, mobilising women to raise their voices for an end to this inter-tribal conflict.

Time and again, members hold peace rallies, visit relief camps of both tribes, distribute relief materials, and motivate the women to join in their initiatives. Said Bipi, in an interview in 2009, "The indiscriminate killing by militant outfits, the ethnic clashes, and the atrocities of security agencies on common people during search operations, have made our lives vulnerable. Many from traditional tribal families have become homeless, as they have had to abandon their original villages. From being farmers, most have become daily wage earners. Women and children are the worst sufferers of such migration and misery."

According to Mikon Rongpharpi, Vice President, KNCA, even elderly women are sexually harassed by security agencies. In 2007, a fifty-five-year-old Karbi woman was raped by army jawans (soldiers) in Singhasan Timung village. As of mid-2009 her case was still pending in the Guwahati High Court. Owing to the extremely isolated location of the village and the age-related ailments of the victim, it was becoming difficult for her to appear in court on time and the possibility of justice ever being delivered was remote.

Bipi pointed out that even KNCA members are often subjected to harassment. For instance, on December 25, 2005, two Karbi girls, allegedly involved with the Karbi Longri North Cachar Hills Liberation Front (KLNLF), were apprehended by security personnel, and subsequently raped

and killed. Later, the forces claimed that the bodies of the girls were not recovered. When KNCA, although it had nothing to do with the alleged involvement of the girls in militant activities, demanded that the details of the post-mortem report be disclosed, the police started harassing them and accusing them of having links with KLNLF.

Despite the challenges, there is good news in this story. KNCA's struggle for peace and more political power to the women of the region resulted in the election of the first Karbi woman, Kabon Ingtipi, to the Karbi Anglong Autonomous District Council. In 1996, Ingtipi was elected from the Hamren constituency as executive member.

This is how a small, determined group of women, far from the centres of power and overlooked by the rest of the country, has been making a significant difference to the lives of the forgotten people of these hills.

(*The names of the rape victim and her parents have been changed to protect their identities.*)

Hope Among the Ruins: Fulara Wants to Farm Again

Ratna Bharali Talukdar

Goalpara (Assam): Meet Fulara Sira, 45, a tribal widow, mother of four, and the survivor of an ethnic clash that displaced her family for several months. As she made her way to the weekly prayer service at her local village church, Fulara did not forget to take along with her a small packet of rice. Despite the hunger and poverty this Garo tribeswoman from Ginogre village was experiencing herself, she always made it a point to donate her weekly share of rice, saved from family meals, at the church.

For the villagers of Ginogre in Goalpara district, located along the Assam-Meghalaya border, donating rice had become a routine. After community prayers every Sunday, the donated rice was collected and later sold to the really needy at Rs 14

per kilogram instead of the market price of Rs 20-25. The money raised in this way was being put aside to fund the reconstruction of twenty-six homes and a church that had been burnt down during the January 2011 clashes between the Garo and Rabha tribes.

Ginogre was severely affected in that ethnic violence, which claimed at least twelve lives and instantly displaced 60,000 people from both the warring communities. Uprooted from their homes and hearths, the affected people were forced to take refuge in thirty-six relief camps set up in both Assam and Meghalaya.

Fortunately, due to the prompt action taken by both state administrations as well as assistance from local civil society organisations, the displaced villagers were able to go back home within six months. To restart life, each family was given a grant of Rs 10,000 and three bundles of galvanised corrugated iron sheets to construct their home.

Surely this had to be one of those rare stories of success where the internally displaced were concerned. But the reality on the ground was very different. Merely returning the victims to their destroyed villages could not make for a happy beginning. Where was the infrastructure to live a normal life – a school, a health centre; where were the livelihood opportunities that could enable families to earn money and put food on the table?

Though the problems were many, it was the lack of employment that was turning out be the biggest spoiler. The ethnic clashes had destroyed the age-old economic interdependence between the Garos and the Rabhas, vital for the sustenance of both communities – and the local authorities were completely indifferent to this. Moreover, being illiterate and extremely poor, the people did not know how to access even those government schemes and benefits that were meant exclusively for tribals.

Ginogre village, in fact, was the perfect example of institutional neglect. Take healthcare. While the state Department of Health was supposed to appoint Accredited

Social Health Activists, or volunteer health workers, for every village – and these women have indeed successfully intervened elsewhere – there were none in Ginogre, located in one of the most malaria-prone areas of the country.

In fact, the nearest health centre was located in Mendipathar, some four kilometres away, and the road that led to the skeletal facility was so bad that most women opted to have their deliveries at home. Water-borne diseases were the other major health concern. Families were dependent on dug wells for drinking water, which was often contaminated with sewage. In terms of basic nutrition, the rice meant for Below Poverty Line people was distributed only once every two months, and card-holders got only ten kilos instead of the government-sanctioned monthly quota of thirty-five kilos.

Another government scheme that eluded the community was the disbursement of pensions. Fulara had suffered on that count too. Though her husband, Darshan Marak, a primary school teacher, had died of an unidentified disease in 2008, she had not able to secure his pension even three years after his demise.

Before the clashes ruined her life, Fulara was making ends meet by living off her small plot of agricultural land. Along with a rubber plantation of nearly a hectare, she was able to feed her family for four months of the year through farming and somehow managed to keep things going for the rest of the time. But, in the fighting that broke out, everything got burnt down, including her livestock and home. The family fled to the East Garo Hills of Meghalaya, close to the Assam border, the traditional home of their tribespeople, and then languished in makeshift relief camps for over three months.

Although she came back to Ginogre, survival was challenging. "For some days we had to beg for survival. Though this is against our norms and customs, there was nothing else we could do. Now, my elder son, who is a student of Class XII, works as a daily wage earner to feed us," Fulara revealed when we met her in 2011.

Fulara's was not the only family in the village that was

struggling with its circumstances. The violence had resulted in widespread penury. Yet, hope came to them in the shape of a unique economic initiative. The Assam branch of the Indian Red Cross Society (IRCS) and the International Committee on Red Cross had joined forces to start the Micro Economic Initiative Programme (MEIP), aimed at improving the living conditions of the "most affected" families.

Elaborated Laba Kumar Sharma, who headed the field activities of MEIP's pilot project, "The MEIP aimed at providing actual rehabilitation to conflict victims by making available productive material to them on the basis of their traditional livelihood and needs. It followed a very distinctive procedure to identify the most affected families instead of just distributing something in the name of rehabilitation."

To achieve this, the programme laid emphasis on phased activities, which included a profile assessment of the affected villages in order to identify the most affected people; a house-to-house survey in these identified villages to find out more about the traditional skills on which these families had relied prior to the conflict situation. This was followed by identifying the actual needs of the most affected, in coordination with the local administrative authorities, and then distributing materials after consultation with the village headman and other concerned persons. Measures were also laid down to monitor and evaluate the efficacy of the intervention.

MEIP started off by reaching out to four of the most affected villages, which covered both the affected ethnic groups: Ginogre and Puthimari in Goalpara district of Assam and Genang and Thapa Dangre of the East Garo Hills District of Meghalaya. Said Deba Prasad Sarma, Planning and Reporting Coordinator, IRCS, Assam, "We distributed productive materials in accordance with the previous sources of livelihood of the affected people, and since such materials are ready-to-use, the beneficiaries can resume their economic activity from the very next day itself."

In order to monitor the use of the assistance provided through MEIP and to assess the economic worthiness of the

income generating activities, all the families were asked to open a bank account in a financial institution near them before they were given the productive grant. They were also instructed to deposit a certain amount of money earned through their work in that account.

Significantly, MEIP had already been successfully implemented for conflict victims of Darrang-Udalguri districts, which had also seen an outbreak of ethnic violence between the religious minority community and the Bodos in 2008. Over 1,00,000 people had been displaced those incidents.

In 2011, Fulara was full of new energy. A beneficiary of MEIP, she was completely focused on reviving her small farm and rubber plantation. She had even got Red Cross survey volunteers to visit the site where her luscious trees had once stood and she had identified the places where she wanted to plant them once again. She was all geared up to start earning an independent livelihood. This was the only way, she believed, to forget the bitterness of the immediate past and move on to a hopefully happier future.

Women of Nandigram Come Together in Conflict

Aditi Bhaduri

Nandigram (West Bengal): In March 2007, and then again in November that year, the streets of Kolkata, the state capital of West Bengal, were overflowing with people who expressed their outrage over the political violence that was unleashed on the hapless inhabitants of Nandigram.

This rural pocket in the district of East Midnapore – now renamed Purba Medinipur – had turned into a battleground, with the then ruling party of the state, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)], pitted against the Trinamool Congress-backed Bhoomi Ucched Pratirodh Committee

(BUPC), over the conversion of fertile agricultural land into a Special Economic Zone (SEZ).

How did the Nandigram face-off unfold? In December 2006, the CPI(M) government issued a notice of land acquisition to set up an SEZ. Violent protests by BUPC followed. As the situation began to spin out of control, the notification was withdrawn, but the violence continued for another eleven months. It was only after the industries agreed to move out of the region permanently that things begin to simmer down.

Two years later, in 2009, the people of Nandigram were still trying to pick up the pieces of their shattered lives. Among them, it was the women who had emerged as the face of hope thanks to the activities of the Matangini Mahila Samiti (MMS) – the Matangini Women's Committee. Set up during the conflict in July 2007, the organisation had been providing moral, legal and social support to the women of Nandigram ever since.

MMS – which draws its name from Matangini Hazra, a martyr from Nandigram, who heroically led a procession against the British during the 1942 Quit India Movement – was started by local women like Radharani Ari, Krishna Mondol and Chabi Maity, with help from Kolkata-based activists, Deblina Chakaborty and Juita Das. Many of the local women who joined MMS had themselves experienced assault, molestation or rape during the Nandigram clashes. They were attacked precisely because they were on the frontlines of the battle from the very first uprising against the SEZ that took place on January 3, 2007.

Radharani explained why local women felt so strongly about the issue: "We worked on the land too. If it had been taken away for monetary compensation, the money would have gone to the men. Even the jobs would have been for the men. What would have happened to us? We would have had to beg from the men in our families to survive."

MMS, which came into being after the first round of violence, initially set out to educate women about the concept of the SEZ, so that they were aware of the forces they were up against and the strategies they would need. The sessions were

conducted once a month by the Kolkata activists. Most MMS members acknowledged that it was these initial meetings that were responsible for the confidence with which Nandigram's women fought for their rights. Not only did they become aware of land rights, women's rights and violations committed by the authorities, they were also able to raise their voices against various social malpractices with considerable success. Later, they managed to keep a close watch on the elected representatives of the area and even continued their work on issues like health and education for girls and women – issues that desperately needed to be addressed in Nandigram much after the violence subsided.

Habiba Bibi was one of the transformed women of MMS. Hailing from Garchakreberia, a predominantly Muslim village, where for years women had been told that Islam forbade them from becoming socially and politically active, Habiba became an agent of change once she joined MMS. She soon realised that this was just another ploy by a patriarchal society to control women. So she spoke with local women to try to make them see things her way. She argued that God wanted people to speak up against evil, and since the forced acquisition of land was not ethical, women could organise and protest without fear. Habiba's argument was convincing, enough and many Muslim women came out of their homes to participate in MMS meetings.

In July 2007, came another breakthrough when MMS members were successful in shutting down five liquor shops in the villages of Shonachura, Gokulnagar and Garchakraberia. Recalled Krishna Mondol, "We realised that alcohol had a terrible impact on our men and it caused a lot of problems for the family. Men who drink often beat up their wives and also squandered all the household money on alcohol."

In November 2007, when the *harmads* – as CPI(M) political activists are known locally – launched an assault against the people, the police simply stood by without intervening. It was only when MMS women threatened to confiscate their weapons that the police stepped in to take control.

However, some successes apart, MMS women soon found out that transforming attitudes was actually a long, arduous battle. Time and again, they faced opposition from their own families. Deblina Chakroborty, the activist associated with MMS, recalled the time the husband of a member barged in on a monthly gathering because his wife had not served him lunch before coming there. However, when he saw the number of women gathered, he quietly went back home. Krishna Mondol had a hilarious episode to relate as well. Once, her husband actually hid her sari so that she would not be able to go out of the house for a meeting. But she was adamant and he relented on the condition that she let him accompany her. Krishna instantly agreed. Eventually, even her husband became an enthusiastic MMS activist!

In any conflict, women are the soft targets, and the maelstrom in Nandigram was no exception. Not surprisingly then, all of MMS's work is focused on helping women caught in the crossfire to reclaim their lost dignity. In 2007, the High Court of Kolkata ordered the state government to give a compensation of Rs 200,000 to victims of rape and sexual assault, though the administration managed to get a stay on that order. But there are women like Radharani, who are determined to fight this. This grandmother created waves when she claimed that the *harmads* had raped her. "It was not easy for me, but I came forward because I had nothing to lose," she said. What helped her take the decision to speak out was the knowledge that she wasn't alone in her struggle. "All my village sisters are with me and MMS continues to give me enormous moral support. They have provided us with a new perspective: they've shown us that women are not helpless instruments to be used by men," she said.

Lakhi Rani Das was another victim of the violence. Both her husband, Pritish, and her mother-in-law were badly beaten up during the conflict. The burden of keeping the family going entirely fell on Lakhi, who earned some money by helping out in her neighbour's tea stall. It is for women like her that MMS has proved to be a great source of strength, besides providing a window to a wider world.

Delivering Health Care at Gun Point in Salboni

Ajitha Menon

Paschim Medinipur (West Bengal): Sombari Hemrom gave birth to a premature baby boy in June 2010 in Kalaimuri village that comes under Salboni block in the Maoist-affected district of West Midnapore – now named Paschim Medinipur – in West Bengal. "I thought I would die, my baby would die," recalled the twenty-eight-year-old woman.

Fortunately, Sombari's worst fears did not come true. Timely intervention from the doctor and nurse at a makeshift health centre in the village saved both their lives. It's another matter that the said health centre's 'doctor' was a quack, and the 'nurse' an untrained attendant.

How did this alternative health delivery system come about? Explained Aarti Mahato, 55, of Kalaimuri village: "The insurgency started in this region around 2007-08 and reached its peak in 2009-10. Government officials, including the health department staff posted here, fled the area fearing for their lives. There was no one left to run the government offices, schools or health centres."

Incidentally, it was this lack of development and basic amenities in Paschim Medinipur, one of the most backward regions of the eastern state, that has often been cited as the primary reason for the local people's support of the Maoist insurgency. For example, according to 2007 figures posted by the district administration, Salboni block had a population of about 1,65,000. For these rural residents, the state government provided just one hospital and three primary health centres (PHCs). Apart from that, there was one central government health undertaking and one privately-run nursing home. The total number of beds in the block stood at seventy-nine, while there were only twelve doctors on the rolls. This, in a region where malnutrition was high, where skin diseases like scabies were common, where tuberculosis and malaria were rife, and

where diarrhoea-related illnesses were flourishing due to sub-standard drinking water, bad hygiene and a poor diet.

Even the few doctors and nurses on the rolls hardly made an appearance at the PHCs or the health sub-centres. According to Pradyut Mahato, who was at one point a member of the Maoist-backed People's Committee Against Police Atrocities (PCAPA), there were times when only a compounder could be seen selling medicines which were actually meant for free distribution. He stoutly maintained that it was wrong to say that the Maoist movement had destroyed health facilities in the district – they were negligible in any case. One of the reasons why PCAPA received local support at the height of the insurgency was because it had started its own health centres to help the rural people. Said Mahato, "We used the village women to run these centres."

That was where the unqualified 'doctors' and untrained 'nurses' came into being. In fact, Aarti was one of them. She explained how she became a nurse: "The situation was terrible. Many of our men and women joined the movement voluntarily while others were forced to do so at gunpoint. In any case, there was no work to be found. Our children could not go to school and there was hardly any food in the house. But worst of all, there was no one to care for pregnant women, deliver babies or even treat a snake bite. So I agreed to be a health attendant when the PCAPA asked me." She, along with two other women, took up nursing duties in the village.

PCAPA set up about twenty-five to thirty such medical centres during 2009-10 in different villages in blocks like Salboni and Binpur–I, where the violence-affected village of Lalgarh is located. Local doctors and nursing attendants either served in these camps voluntarily or were forced to do so at gunpoint. Several untrained people were also asked to chip in. Each of these centres catered to about 100-150 patients on a daily basis.

Jyotsna Tudu, 25, a trained nurse serving in Lalgarh, recalled that difficult time: "Money was at a premium. People had no food to eat. Ration shops were closed and there was

no agricultural produce. The Maoists extorted Rs 10-20 and a kilo of rice from every household that could afford it. Families were often left with nothing. Malnutrition became one of the primary health concerns in the region."

It was in such conditions that PCAPA arranged for free medicines and also distributed glucose and Electral powder gratis. But there were too many people suffering and very little relief. According to Dr. R. Dey, former block medical officer of Chandra block in Paschim Medinipur, the government tried its best to reach medical facilities to the remotest areas in the district, but the threat from the Maoists was just too great for the medical staff to handle. In fact, Dr. Dey claimed that the health centres set up by PCAPA were nothing but a front for Maoist operations.

According to Tarulata Mahato, 38, who acted as a compounder at a PCAPA-supported health centre in Binpur-I block, when the joint paramilitary operations against the Maoists began in July 2009, the first targets were these health centres. "The forces claimed that Maoists were being given shelter and treated there. But how were we to differentiate between a common villager and a Maoist when someone came in with high fever, bouts of vomiting or a snake bite?" she asked.

By agreeing to work at these PCAPA-run medical centres, the poor villagers were only looking to help each other out in times of adversity, but even that effort had to be carried out under life-threatening conditions. Said Kalpana Mahato, 45, of Bhulabera village, "I am a trained nursing attendant. I used to work at the government-run PHC before the officials ran away. So, when the PCAPA ordered me to work in their health centre, I agreed so that at least the people could avail of some medical care. Moreover, if I had refused, the Maoists would have shot me."

When the paramilitary forces started gaining ground in the insurgency-affected district, PCAPA-run medical centres were closed down. But it took a while for the government PHCs to begin functioning again and this gap in terms of health

services caused untold suffering to a population that was in dire need of medical attention. Srimati Mahato, 60, of Binpur-I, for instance, found herself in a difficult situation at that point: "My daughter-in-law was six months pregnant. There was no staff at the nearest health centre, which was anyway twenty-five kilometres away. She had not seen a doctor for months and I was frantic with worry about her safety and the life of her unborn child."

Instances like this explained why local people had come to accept the alternative health delivery system set up by the PCAPA, despite its shotgun methods and subversive agenda. As Mahato argued, "If the state government ignores the needs of the people, they will have to do something about it. We realised the need of the people and that's why we ran these medical camps ourselves."

Clearly, if there is one lesson to be learnt from Salboni it is this: if the state ignores health care, it creates grounds for alienation and conflict.

Scars of War: Kargil's Blowback in Kangra

Nirupama Dutt

Kangra (Himachal Pradesh): Over a decade after the war that claimed their young sons and husbands had ended, a sense of loss was still very much a part of the lives of mothers and wives in the Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh (HP). This is a region from where many young men have traditionally served in the army – a tradition that dates back to pre-Mughal times. The two-month war, which broke out after Pakistani soldiers and militants infiltrated the Indian side of the Line of Control, started in late May, 1999 in the Kargil district of Jammu & Kashmir.

The impact of the war can be felt to this day in the tea garden town of Palampur in HP. Two promising young officers,

Lieutenant Saurabh Kalia and Captain Vikram Batra, came from this town and their close relatives continue to grieve for them.

For Vijay Kalia, a former Sanskrit teacher in her mid-fifties, things have never been the same since the badly mutilated body of her twenty-two-year-old son, Saurabh, was delivered at her doorstep in June 1999. When we met her in 2009, the grief-stricken woman said that she had not even caught a glimpse of her son in his uniform – "He was martyred even before his first paycheque arrived."

It was Saurabh's dream to join the Indian army even while he was studying at the Kendriya Vidyalya (Central school) at Palampur. This, despite the fact that his father, N.K. Kalia, was a senior scientist. Commissioned from the Indian Military Academy, Dehradun, Lt. Kalia was posted with the 4 Jat Regiment (Infantry) to serve in the Kargil sector and was one of the first officers to be killed in that war. He was captured along with five other soldiers at Bajrang Post and was brutally tortured for three weeks before being shot dead.

The hall on the first floor of the Kalia residence has been converted into a museum to Saurabh's memory. Here, the young officer's uniforms, unused toiletries, and photographs have been preserved with care. Vijay and her husband spend a lot of time in this room when they are at home. Said Saurabh's father, "Whatever monetary compensation we got, we donated to charity. If the government wanted to help us, they should have taken up the issue of ensuring that every captured soldier is accorded dignified treatment on both sides of the border. Sometimes I wish his mother had not seen his mutilated body." Of course, Vijay was quick to add, "Everyone has to die one day. It gives me satisfaction that our Saurabh laid his life down for the country."

Similar sentiments were voiced by the parents of Param Veer Chakra Capt. Vikram Batra of the 13 Jammu & Kashmir Rifles. The young captain, fond of driving and country music, shared his birth month with the famed patriot-revolutionary Bhagat Singh, and like his icon, he too wanted to make his mark on the country's history.

Sorrow seemed to have found a permanent dwelling place in the eyes of Kamal Kant Batra, as she remembered how her son had rejected a job with the merchant navy for a career in the army. "He told me that a career in the merchant navy would mean good money but he wanted to do something more than just make money. For us, his death is, of course, an irretrievable loss, but he did us and the whole nation proud," she said. Meanwhile, the Batras, who worked at the Kendriya Vidyalya in Palampur, are providing support to others who have suffered experiences similar to theirs.

In fact, both the Kalias and the Batras are active in army welfare societies as well as social and educational institutions. They enjoy a lot of respect in Kangra and have become opinion shapers, sometimes even being called upon to counsel others.

According to Kishwar Ahmed Shirali, a psychologist and women's activist based in Sidhbarhi, some thirty kilometres from Palampur, "Glorifying patriotism and celebrating the bravery of young soldiers who become cannon fodder is a way of coping with loss. It is very difficult to lose a child and society tries to compensate for this loss by according honour to the close relatives of those who are killed in battle. Every other village in this region has a gate dedicated to one young martyr or another. But actually each of these deaths is in itself a strong appeal against war and conflict."

If there are inconsolable parents, there are grief-stricken wives as well. There are cases where soldiers have died leaving behind teenaged brides with whom they had lived for barely a month. For these young women, losing their husband was not the only blow. They have also had to deal with relatives trying to lay their hands on the monetary compensation due to them. Take the case of Sudarshana Devi of Jiya village in Kangra. She was just twenty when her husband, Rifleman Rakesh Chand of the J&K Rifles, serving in Kargil, died on June 14, 1999. During his last rites, she pushed aside the village elders and offered a shoulder to his coffin as it was being taken for cremation.

But after the tragedy, came the travails. Her husband's

family called her a witch who had killed their son. A bitter battle ensued for the compensation that was made in Rakesh's name when Sudarshana decided to remarry, after being encouraged to do so by people like Vijay Kalia. Eventually, Rakesh's pension was divided between his mother and his wife. With the money she received, Sudarshana built a house and married Jagdish Raj, a cab driver. Today, she is a mother of two children, and the couple runs a petrol pump at Tahliwal in Una district.

While Sudarshana has managed to rebuild her life, it has certainly not been an easy process. "Apart from the few people who know me, I am judged poorly for having remarried. My marriage has remained a subject of gossip even after all these years. I still cherish the memory of Rakesh and can never forget him, but life has to go on," she said.

There are also instances where widows have been married off to their younger brothers-in-law – a very old practice in this region – so that the compensation they received would remain within the family. Sometimes such arrangements were made after forcing the widow to fall in line, but other women have actively opted to remain within the families of their deceased husbands. Take Smridhi Kanta of Jahu village in Bilaspur district. Smridhi married her childhood sweetheart, Rifleman Deep Chand, in February 1999, widowed that June, and delivered a baby girl in December. Her husband's parents offered to marry her to their other son, Vijay, also a rifleman with the J&K Rifles, who returned home after seven years of service. Smridhi thought over it and then agreed. "The wife of Deep's commanding officer advised me to go ahead. Life moves on, but I always draw strength from the love I got from Deep. Our daughter is cherished by the whole family because she is Deep's living memory," she said.

The Kargil war guns have fallen silent. But the Indo-Pak border is not free of conflict. Bodies of dead soldiers continue to be brought home every now and then. Monica Devi of Tang village in Yole Cantt, Kangra district, was six months pregnant in 2006 when the body of her husband, Ravi Kumar, was

returns home from the Poonch sector in Kashmir. With her young daughter, Prakriti, she lives in her late husband's home. Pointing to photographs in her wedding album, she said, "Life has given me a cruel shock. I now live only for this child."

Said her aunt, Mishro Devi, who organises Mahila Mandals (women's groups) in Kangra, "It's only after four or more years of such a death that a family can take the decision to marry the widow to her younger brother-in-law, otherwise the wounds are still raw." She added that she had counselled her sister and brother-in-law to be kind to their unfortunate daughter-in-law who was not yet twenty-five years old at that point.

Explained Mishro Devi, "Families here have small landholdings but it is rocky land. So joining the army is a way of making a career and providing for the future. Unfortunately, such a career also includes the danger of a premature date with death and misery for those left behind."

Health Care Workers Deliver Hope in Maoist Country

Sarada Lahangir

Koraput (Odisha): The eastern state of Odisha has the fourth highest number of fatalities due to conflict among Indian states, after West Bengal, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand. Within Odisha, it is Koraput district that has witnessed the highest number of such deaths. In 2010, there were at least forty-three such fatalities.

In such a situation, imagine the plight of poverty-stricken communities living in the hinterland when it comes to accessing health care. People here are sometimes unable to get treatment even for those who are grievously ill, either because health personnel refuse to come fearing attack, or because there is

no source of transportation due to an outbreak of violence or a strike call.

In these extremely disturbed conditions, where there is no doctor and where there is constant fear caused by the endless cycle of Maoist violence and state reprisal, it is the Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) who has lived up to her name: *asha*, which in Hindi means hope.

Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen once observed that ASHAs are the "God of many hopes and the beast of all burdens". Many in Koraput would vouch for the truth of those words, and among them would be Barti Jani, 23, of Mademgandi village in Potangi block. It is because of the ASHA of her village, Moti Jani, that Barti is alive today. "I owe my life to Moti *didi* (elder sister)," said the young woman. It was Moti who had her taken to a hospital at two o'clock on a stormy night in 2010.

Recalled Barti, "I was three months pregnant and suddenly experienced a severe pain in my lower abdomen. The hospital at Potangi is about seven kilometres from our village. My husband asked the neighbours to help, but nobody came forward because people don't leave their homes at night fearing Maoist attacks. At that point, Moti *didi* – who lives in another hamlet two kilometres away – arrived. She convinced a villager to lend us his rickshaw. With my husband pulling it, we could reach the hospital at around 4:30 a.m. I was admitted and operated upon immediately."

Dr. N.K. Kar of Potangi hospital, too, was all praise for Moti: "Barti had an ectopic pregnancy. The tube had ruptured and she was bleeding internally. If she hadn't been brought on time, we couldn't have saved her. The whole credit for that one life being saved must go to ASHA Moti Jani, who showed immense courage in bringing her to hospital at night, when people are too scared to travel on these roads even during the day."

In nearby Phulpadar village, a young man – Sarbeswar Muduli – is also full of gratitude. Phulpadar, around eighteen kilometres from the headquarters of Koraput district, is one

of its most inaccessible pockets. To reach here, one would have to hire a vehicle for the first fifteen kilometres and then cover the rest of the distance of three kilometres on foot. Three years ago, Sarbeswar lost his wife during childbirth because they could not make it to the hospital in time. When he remarried, he made sure his new wife's pregnancy was supervised by "ASHA *didi*, Minati Gauda". It was she who took the couple to the Koraput district hospital where the expectant mother had a safe delivery.

There are stories like these everywhere in this tribal district. Talk to the ASHAs themselves, and their commitment to their work comes through. Sabitri Bisoyee, 35, became an ASHA some four years ago. She covers thirteen villages, a territory of twelve to fifteen square kilometres of forested terrain. And she does this on foot. Said Sabitri, "Most of the time, there is no transportation available and the ongoing conflict between the state and extremists has only made things worse."

Although the government had promised cycles and mobile phones to women like her, so far nothing has reached them. Most ASHAs come from poor families and are in dire need of a regular income themselves. Parvati Dora, 32, who has studied up to Class Six, described her situation: "I belong to a very poor family and it is difficult for us to live on my elderly father's wages. It was to help the family out that I became an ASHA. We got trained to do many things, like collecting blood samples, distributing medicines, and providing general primary health care."

Even as the fear factor looms large, ASHAs try to remain focused on saving the patient's life. But this is often difficult given the poor facilities in primary health centres and the general absence of doctors. Many have reported that they feel "helpless" in the face of such challenges. Women like Parvati have, in fact, largely shouldered the responsibility of delivering health care in rural Odisha, and Dr. R.N. Das, the chief district medical officer of Koraput, had no hesitation in agreeing with this observation: "It is difficult to get trained

doctors, and at least 30-40 per cent of government medical posts lie vacant because no one wants to come here to work. We ultimately we have to rely on these poor women," he said.

A senior consultant and ASHA coordinator for the National Rural Health Mission, Sushant Nayak, who is based in state capital Bhubaneswar, has estimated that in Odisha, as of 2011, there were more than 40,000 ASHAs in place, with Koraput alone accounting for 1,400 such women.

Despite their undoubted importance, the issue of fair compensation for ASHAs hardly figures in public discussions. About 70 per cent of the total income of ASHAs is earned through the Janani Suraksha Yojana (Safe Motherhood Scheme), under which they are required to bring pregnant women to health institutions for their deliveries. They receive Rs 600 per delivery, including Rs 250 for transportation. However, they get nothing for their work in antenatal and postnatal care.

In fact, according to a report of the Orissa Technical and Management Support Team (TMST), the ASHAs of the under-serviced, relatively inaccessible Koraput-Bolangir-Kalahandi region are paid 25 per cent less than those elsewhere in the state. According to TMST calculations, as of 2011, the potential monthly income of an ASHA here was Rs 1,800. However, on an average, she earned Rs 954, and often actually received only Rs 721. "Payments to ASHAs are incentive based, but sometimes we can't even get the Rs 100 we are supposed to be paid as incentive per delivery. In all, I earn about Rs 700-800 a month," said Sabitri, who has to help support a family of six.

Bhanumati Gadaba, an ASHA of Maliguda village in the district, explained the lags: "We are often paid in bulk for several months of work. There are no written statements for payments made, which means we are unable to verify whether the amount we get is correct. There is also no system to reimburse us if there are errors." A common complaint among these women has been that they lack job security since they

don't officially exist on any of the rolls. In fact, as Sabitri pointed out, even ASHAs with a decade of experience are yet to be regularised.

C.H. Shantakar, a local social activist, has argued that more should be done for these women: "Additional incentives should be made available to them so that they can play their designated role as community mobilisers and service providers. They also need skill enhancement so that they can conduct themselves with greater confidence."

Seeing Koraput's ASHAs in action brings Amartya Sen's observation back to mind. These unsung women do indeed play the role of God by saving lives. But they certainly need to be given the recognition they deserve and a just monetary compensation for their efforts.

Kandhamal's Wonder Women Fight Hate

Eliza Parija

Kandhamal (Odisha): It was Laxmi Priya Parida's moment of truth. One morning in 2008, this woman from Bramunigaon village located in Odisha's Kandhamal district, answered a knock on the door only to be confronted by a group of men holding swords behind their backs.

"They started threatening me. They asked me why, despite being the daughter of a Hindu, I was not 'participating' in the attack against Christians," recalled Laxmi, who is in her mid-thirties. They also accused her and her family of supporting Christians and said that they would impose a fine of Rs 20,000 on the family for this 'offence'. The intruders did not stop at that; they also issued a threat to kill Laxmi and burn down her home if the family did not fall in line.

Kandhamal district was convulsed by attacks on the local Christian tribal community in late 2007, after the murder of Vishwa Hindu Parishad leader, Swami Lakshmananda

Saraswati, who had been working against Christian conversions of tribals in the region. The assassination was allegedly committed by Maoist insurgents in the area, but it was the tribal Christian community that was held responsible, and it came to be the focus of murderous assaults which led to the destruction of numerous homes, houses of worship and educational institutions in the area. Some 50,000 people were estimated to have been displaced in several waves of violence that raged in the area, well into 2008.

Laxmi, a social worker by profession, had been working to rehabilitate those who had fled in terror in the wake of the attacks and also encourage people from all communities to maintain peace in her village. That morning, she did not lose her nerve while confronting the mob at the door. She explained to the agitators that on no account would her family take part in any attacks on local Christians. She also appealed to the men to stop spreading more violence. "I knew I was pleading with a group of people who had lost all sense of humanity and rationality. Inside of me, I was scared. I also knew that my family was terrorised by the recent events, but my conscience wouldn't allow me to bow before a misdirected mob," she said, when we spoke to her in 2009. What helped her muster up her courage was the memory of the frightened faces of all those people who had fled to nearby forests when the violence had broken out and who were forced to go without food and water for days.

Married to a Christian, Laxmi found that this fact sometimes worked in her favour. "When I approach ordinary people from both the Hindu and Christian communities, they welcome me. But then there are times when the fundamentalists consider me a traitor," she said. The activist worked for an Odisha-based organisation, the Council of Professional Social Workers, that focuses on securing livelihoods for tribals, Dalits and the rural poor. Ever since the ethno-religious conflict broke out in the region, Laxmi, along with her colleagues, started focusing on recovery and peace building through Self-Help Groups (SHGs) covering eight

panchayats in the district. Explained Laxmi, "We knew that some people in our village – with a population of nearly 8,000 – had been given arms, which if used could have led to a volatile situation. However, we were successful in convincing members of both communities to abjure any show of hatred and violence, at least in our village."

Like Laxmi, several women in Kandhamal made efforts to spread the message of peace and harmony between the different communities. Ratnamala Kanhara, 20, from Pubingia village, was one of them. Although very young, she had been personally affected by the riots and had vowed to bring people together. During an early explosion of violence, her father had been murdered by fundamentalists for protesting the killing of a person, and her family had been forced to flee to the forests fearing further attacks. But Ratnamala maintained that she did not harbour any animosity towards any religion even though her father had been murdered in the name of religion. "My mother, two sisters and I want to make people aware that killing in the name of religion is abhorrent," she said.

Ratnamala had spoken out about her experiences while participating in a training camp on peace organised by a coalition of NGOs in Kandhamal in December 2008. She was one of the nearly 150 young girls who had participated in a peace-building measure at the Tumudibandha and G. Udaygiri blocks in the district at that point.

Despite such initiatives involving women of all ages and regardless of the heartening stories of individual courage like that of Laxmi, the participation of women in peace-building measures in Kandhamal had remained confined largely to the informal level. The team of Women's International League for Peace & Freedom and Women in Security, Conflict Mitigation and Peace, which visited the district in January 2009, had observed in its report that women were given low priority in conflict resolution. It noted that although the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 stresses "the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in

peace-building" and the need to increase women's "role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution", there were no women on the peace committees in Kandhamal.

This, despite the fact that several women were victims of violence precisely because of their public positions. The rape of a Catholic nun at K. Nuagaon in August 2008 was a case in point. Ludhia Diggal, an anganwadi worker from Tikabali village, narrated another incident of a woman health worker who was murdered and her body mutilated. "Several women have been victims of violence during the riots, but their suffering has hardly been reported," she said.

Commented Vasanth Kannabiran of the Hyderabad-based women's resource centre, Asmita, "Women peacekeepers are not at the negotiating and decision-making table and remain confined to the level of overseeing relief camps. It should be remembered that building peace is not just welfare work, it is about educating people, changing mindsets and protesting violence whenever it occurs."

In response, state government sources argued that its peacekeeping efforts focus on the entire community and not just women. They also pointed out that the government has always supported the participation of women's SHGs and women's organisations in these interventions.

Experts, however, emphasise that the significance of women's involvement in peacekeeping is not just because of the specific problems they face as a result of the conflict, but because they are uniquely placed to educate their communities on the values of social harmony. Observed Professor Asha Hans, former head of the School of Women's Studies, Utkal University, Odisha, "Rather than integrating women in the peace building process, they are often used as pawns in conflict situations, as was illustrated in Kandhamal."

There have been instances of hundreds of women in Kandhamal defying the ban on five or more people gathering at a particular spot, which was enforced during the riots. They demonstrated before police stations and government offices

demanding the release of those arrested on charges of rioting. But the problem that emerged time and again in these mobilisations was the lack of unity. They remained divided along religious and political fault lines.

The Independent Tribunal on Kandhamal Violence of 2008, consisting of eminent jurists and activists, had noted that there was tremendous potential for peace-building in Khandamal. Its report pointed out that in 1994, for instance, during the riots between Dalit Christians and tribal Adivasis, mainly as a result of conflict over economic resources like land, women from different tribes and groups had played a leadership role in bringing about social harmony.

Such historical precedents must not be forgotten. Khandamal demonstrated how vital the role of women is in post-conflict scenarios.

After the Delhi Riots, How Women Rebuilt their Lives

Nirupama Dutt

Mohali (Punjab): A large oil painting of a tall and handsome Sikh dominates Lakhbir Kaur's modest sitting room in Kumbra village in Mohali, near Chandigarh. She explained how it came about: "I found a small black-and-white picture of my father in a relative's album and my husband got a friend of his to make this painting for us."

For Lakhbir, the painting is a constant reminder of the days that followed the assassination of India's first woman Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, on October 31, 1984, when Delhi came to be engulfed in a horrific anti-Sikh pogrom that saw the killing of 2,733 Sikhs in the capital alone, according to official figures. "We were sitting in our home in Delhi's Sultanpuri watching television when a mob gathered in the

neighbourhood and started to go on the rampage. Our Muslim neighbours immediately gave us shelter and advised my father to cut his hair and beard," recalled Lakhbir.

Deedar Singh, Lakhbir's father, dismissed the idea. After retiring from the army, he had been working as a security guard in a private company. And since he was also the president of the local Congress party office in Sultanpuri, he believed he was safe. "Both my brothers were out and he went to look for them. He asked us to stay with the neighbours and said he would return shortly. We never saw him again, not even his remains," said Lakhbir.

Lakhbir's mother was one of seven sisters, six of whom lived in different parts of the city. Several of her cousins were killed in that riot. After moving to their neighbour's home, the family members who had survived moved to a camp in Delhi, and from there to a gurudwara in Mohali, Punjab. Lakhbir was only sixteen years old then. It was decided by the larger family that since it was difficult for a young, fatherless girl to survive without protection, she should be married off. And so she was. Her first child, a daughter, was born a year later. She never went back to her Delhi home. There was nothing to go back to – everything had been burnt down.

Even today, this mother of two daughters and a son breaks down while talking about that violent time in her life. "The scars will always remain, but with the support of my husband we have nurtured a sense of love rather than hate in our children," she said with satisfaction.

Sharing similar stories of terror and loss are Kashmir Kaur and Ravindar Kaur, who fled the capital during the riots and sought security in Punjab. They too have rebuilt their broken lives in a spirit of camaraderie and affection and are making significant contributions to their immediate society in different ways. After the great disruption in their lives, these riot-affected women did whatever they could in order to survive: from tailoring clothes to making pickles, from setting up small shops to doing voluntary work in gurudwaras. Although

critical of the way the carnage has got politicised, they always remember with gratitude those who helped save their lives in that moment of terror.

Kashmir's is a rare story of courage. The president of the Riot Victims Welfare Society in Mohali and a member of the general council of Akali Dal Badal in 2009, this strong woman of fifty-seven, who makes it a point to be at the forefront of political rallies and protests in Mohali city, breaks down while recounting the massacre she witnessed in her trans-Yamuna colony of Bhajanpura in Delhi in 1984. She, like Lakhbir, is indebted to her neighbours. "We will be ever grateful to our Hindu neighbours who helped save our lives. My husband, Pritam Singh, along with others, was hidden in a locked room and the women sat on the terrace with stones and red chilli powder. My twelve-year-old son's hair was tied into two plaits and a neighbour lent her daughter's frock for him to wear," she recalled.

When the mobs threatened to burn down the neighbour's house, Kashmir's husband, Pritam, came out of hiding. They decided to gather as many Sikhs from the neigbourhood as possible, pile them into trucks, and move them to a safer place. "We managed to reach the Nanaksar gurdwara by the Yamuna bridge even though three attempts to attack us were made en route. We survived, but those who could not get into the trucks were killed," she said. Later, following instructions from the gurudwara, Pritam went back to Bhajanpura to round up orphaned children. He had to make his way through the burnt bodies of the neighbours to do this. He also saw that their house had been completely ransacked. "The shock was so great for my husband that when he returned, he suffered a stroke. Since then he has remained in poor health," Kashmir revealed.

All that Kashmir and Pritam found remaining in their home was a bed which they loaded on a truck and then headed for Ludhiana, to be with relatives. But that arrangement did not work out in the long term. So they moved to a gurudwara in Chandigarh's Sector 15 from where social workers helped them secure a one-bedroom low-income group flat of the

Punjab Urban Development Authority (PUDA) in Mohali. "I sold the bed for Rs 150, bought a stove and few provisions, and moved here," she said.

In the months that followed the anti-Sikh riots, there was a steady stream of families that came into different cities of Punjab to find refuge. Recalled Tejinder Singh Shergill, who was Chairman of Mohali's Riot Victims Welfare Society in 2009: "Settling them here was not easy. PUDA and the government would regularly send eviction orders. But my uncle, Arjun Singh Shergill, and other social workers saw to it that these people were rehabilitated. As many as 704 homes were allotted to riot victims."

A visit to this colony, now called the Riot Victims Colony in Mohali's Phase XI, presents the picture of a ghetto of sorts, where many are still struggling to survive. This is also where Ravindar Kaur has made a home for herself. Daughter of a *sevadar* (employee) in Bala Sahib gurdwara near Ashram in Delhi, she had been married for six months when the riots broke out. "My husband and I had come to my parents' home. I had stayed home but my parents and husband had gone to attend a party and they were killed," Ravindar said.

Her husband's family, holding her responsible for the death of their son, turned her out. Later, she got married to Amarjit Singh, who had lost his wife and son to the violence. Today, Amarjit is over seventy years old and jobless. The couple has a married daughter and son, who is a special needs child. Although poor, Ravindar is respected in the colony, as she is an active volunteer in the local gurdwara. "The old age pension of the government may not have reached us but the people have always come to our aid," she said.

Added Kashmir, "Some political elements try to inflame sentiments of the people but we try and pacify them. The Society follows up the cases of genuine victims and helps those living below the poverty line." But, according to her, doing this has not always been easy and there have been instances where actual victims never got compensation, while fake ones managed to get flats.

Apart from actively working for the riot-hit, many faceless women have also played the role of caregivers for those rendered physically disabled by the riots. After being bed-ridden for the past twenty-five years, Gurcharan Singh, 42, passed away in February 2009, in Balongi village near Chandigarh. He had been thrown into a burning vehicle outside his house in Delhi's Nawada colony during the riots. He never got any compensation and it was his elder brother's wife who looked after him. On March 11, 2008, he found the strength to depose before the Central Bureau of Investigation, revealing that a prominent Congress leader was with the crowds, inciting people to wipe out the Sikhs.

Commented Kashmir in conclusion, "We are deeply hurt by the fact that those who fomented those killings have not yet been punished. We got no justice and little or no compensation from the government. However, we continue to have faith in humanity because of the kindness that people from different communities, whether Muslim or Hindu or Sikh, demonstrated towards us."

Lessons from Gujarat: To Prevent Riots, Talk to Children

Deepti Priya Mehrotra

Ahmedabad (Gujarat): In 2002, Gujarat was the site of one of the worst communal riots in India's history, with tensions between Hindus and Muslims continuing to simmer long after the immediate violence had died down. The complicity of the state in the violence and the systematic hate campaigns against the minority community was so blatant that commentators often use the term 'pogrom' to describe the events of those stormy days. What made things even worse was the fact that many of those at the receiving end of the violence were from the poorest sections of society.

It was against this dark backdrop that Samerth, an Ahmedabad-based NGO, tried to make a difference. Founded in the early Nineties to promote participatory development among marginalised and vulnerable communities, it was one of the several organisations in the state that diligently worked towards bringing about reconciliation and peace in the post-riot atmosphere of distrust and disquiet.

Samerth founder-trustee Gazala Paul, a post-graduate in Coexistence and Conflict Management from Brandeis University (USA) said in 2009, "In rural Kachchh, our main thrust was on sustainable livelihood practices, while in urban Ahmedabad our focus was on conflict resolution, peace building and education. We got involved extensively in *bastis* (slums) through educational interventions for children and youth and livelihood restoration for women."

Working towards the economic restoration of riot-affected communities since 2003 in the Juhapura, Sarkhej, Jivraj and Vejalpur areas of Ahmedabad – for the benefit of both Hindus and Muslims in the area – Samerth found that the memory of the 2002 violence still troubled people. Most of them were impoverished, largely because of the inadequate compensation given to them by the government in the aftermath of the violence and because of poor civic facilities, generally.

The organisation, therefore, sensitively developed interventions to help overcome the deprivation even as it attempted to change entrenched attitudes of prejudice and hatred. Realising that Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in the shanty towns of the city could provide a vital entry point to mobilise women of both communities, Samerth activists enabled SHG members to set up a savings and credit system as a means of supplementing their incomes. They also made loans available to riot-affected families.

The encouraging response from women of both Hindu and Muslim communities initiated a process of rebuilding trust between them and greater integration. But the most important initiative Samerth launched was focused on children. It sought to make an impact on young minds by developing out-of-the-

box approaches – especially by devising peace modules to tackle the effects of violence.

Shortly after the riots, it ran playgroups in the relief camps. "At that point," recalled Iqbal Baig, the organisation's programme support coordinator, "our focus was more therapeutic in nature. After the closure of the camps, we shifted the pre-schools within the communities to provide pre-school education and carry out peace education with schoolchildren, youth and adolescents, community leaders and the clergy."

A few thousand children – with a fair representation from both the Hindu and Muslim communities – actively participated in the 'peace classes' held in neighbourhood government and private schools in Ahmedabad. The peace modules tackled common biases and brought about a feeling of goodwill and mutual understanding. Quizzes and games, stories about eminent national leaders, special exercises such as the 'spider web' and the 'tree exercise', all helped children focus on topics of peace, non-violence, unity in diversity and social harmony, in a creative and fun way.

Fatma Chopra, a Samerth field worker, who had been actively engaged in developing the peace modules as well as in teaching and conducting classes for young children, explained, "Through our peace modules and quiz competitions, we tried to develop respect and tolerance in the minds of children from different religious and cultural backgrounds. By 2007, we were conducting peace modules in thirty-seven schools. Children got very interested in the approach and there were animated debates on diversity and multiculturalism."

But there were challenges too, as Nasrin Pathan, a peace educator, candidly admitted, "Initially, schools were hesitant and refused permission. But we started inviting eminent personalities as observers. This helped create an environment of trust among the managements. Slowly more schools agreed to cooperate with us."

Samerth then ran playgroups, exposing children to computers and other creative activities even as they got to

understand the meaning and importance of multiculturalism. The organisation also encouraged schools to form Parent Teacher Associations as platforms to discuss issues related to harmony and peaceful coexistence.

Paul explained: "Gujarat had experienced a sequence of communal violence which left a deep impact on the hearts and minds of the people. As a result, the minority community members were forced to huddle together in different settlements like Juhapura, forming ghettoes. The lack of trust between people was so manifest that inter-community interactions had virtually stopped. This isolation allowed conservative and regressive elements to take control and curb reforms and progress. We worked in such an environment and often it was a huge challenge. To gain strength, we reached out to other organisations and built alliances to counter communal prejudices and tackle issues of injustice together. We made efforts to strengthen our networks for wider reach and impact."

The organisation specialised in providing training sessions on conflict transformation and peace building. It built alliances with bodies such as the Ahmedabad Women's Action Group, Sanchetana, and the Self Employed Women's Association, which had already set up SHGs among riot-affected communities.

In order to dispel divisive myths and stereotypes, Samerth widely disseminated amongst children, teachers and parents, the Gujarati translation of a study on multicultural traditions that it had conducted in association with the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. Entitled *Gujarat Unknown - A Study on Syncretic Traditions*, the study traced the multicultural traditions of the state through shrines, anecdotes and experiences, and observed that communities in this region had coexisted for centuries and carried out livelihood activities together, particularly in rural areas. These booklets proved effective in building a general appreciation of how cultures everywhere, including in Gujarat, have influenced each other and how

reinforcing diversity is a precondition for human existence and an effective democracy.

As Paul said, "It took enormous energy and hard work on the part of Samerth staff to convince the schools, youth and women living in the slums to allow us to dwell upon issues of communalism, secularism and peace. But the processes of reconciliation are well-established and we are very happy when we see children responding to our work." Rehana Sheikh, a peace module teacher, added, "When we went into schools we had worked with in the Vejalpur, Jivraj and Sarkhej areas, the children there were friendly and talkative. They shared stories of violence and displayed a genuine interest in other religions and customs. Some of them had even become torch-bearers of the movement against communal feeling."

Samerth's is just one modest example of how a transformation of attitudes, even in the most challenging of circumstances, can be achieved with some innovative conceptualisation. In a climate of communal tension and distrust, the most important site of change is that of the mind of a child. Adding value to concepts like secularism and diversity can go some way towards ensuring that the tragic events of 2002 are never repeated in the Gujarat of the future.

Assam's Women Writers Capture Conflict's Many Shades

Uddipana Goswami

Guwahati (Assam): Incidents of rape by security personnel are not unheard of in Assam, where insurgent violence and ethnic conflict have raged for decades. There was, for instance, the October 2008 case involving two Central Reserve Police Force personnel, who were accused of raping two women in Udalguri district, which falls under the Bodoland Autonomous

Territorial Districts. They were later exonerated. This led to various protests, including those led by Anjali Daimary, a littérateur and president of the Bodo Women's Justice Forum. In an act reminiscent of the action of the Meira Paibis in Imphal (Manipur) in 2004, Daimary and a group of peasant women came out on the streets of Rowta Chariali with the words 'Rape Us' inscribed on their chests and backs.

Indeed, women have been at the forefront of the Bodo struggle for political self-determination. The Bodos, despite being the largest indigenous community in Assam, have long felt dominated by the Axamiya-speaking Hindu community at the helm of all cultural, political and socio-economic power in the state. Their resentment against this domination often found expression in different political protests. By 1987, a full-scale mass movement was launched for a separate state of Bodoland, with the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) taking the lead.

What started as a peaceful non-violent struggle soon turned violent in some pockets, with ABSU floating a military wing: the ABSU Volunteer Force. Women also participated in some measure – although never as direct combatants – in the violent activities that gradually grew in intensity with the emergence of more armed militant formations, like the Bodoland Liberation Tigers (BLT). In 2003, after the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) accord was signed, four contiguous districts – Kokrajhar, Baska, Udalguri and Chirang – came under BTC jurisdiction. But even BTC control did not put an end to the cycle of violence in the region. Fratricidal killings continued, with a handful of the ethnic elite gaining immense power, while the majority lower down in the social and economic order continued to live in deplorable conditions.

The years of blood clashes and the ever-present threat of violence found reflection in the writings of a few Bodo women who chose to use their pen to describe the realities of their times. Renu Bodo, the first Bodo woman postgraduate in the state, has long been endeavouring to create a forum for all

Bodo women writers in order to gather together their dispersed voices so that they can be heard.

Renu, who has written extensively on social and cultural issues, said that although her literary works were not exclusively on subjects relating to the Bodos, they did aim at raising social consciousness and cultural pride within the community. She hoped that her work would "inspire us to look within and identify our shortcomings, instead of blaming those around".

Pramila Narzary is another Bodo woman writer who has, in her fictional writing, criticised the violence and corruption that persisted in the region. In 2005, she became the first Assamese writer/translator to win one of India's highest literary awards – the Sahitya Akademi award – for her translations in the Bodo language, after it was granted recognition under the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution in 2003.

Her short story, *NREGA Jagra Hagra*, for instance, was about how political and community leaders have deprived the common people of their dues under state-sponsored schemes for rural development, like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Act, which guarantees 100 days of wage employment to certain rural households. The story carries a message of hope as in the end, ordinary people rise up against rampant corruption. Although *NREGA Jagra Hagra* upheld the importance of political protest, Pramila maintained that subjects like conflict are incidental to her writing.

But there are not many women like Renu and Pramila. Although the Bodos have been engaged in a nearly two-decade-long (1987-2003) conflict with the State, not many have directly addressed the issues of insurgent violence and the politics of identity, separatism and sovereignty in their work. As Renu said, "We would, at the request of our leader, write one-act plays or poetry with political messages during the years that the Bodo movement was going on, so that they could be performed in rallies and political meetings. They might have been printed in souvenirs or journals, thereafter, but we have

not compiled them." This is indeed a sad commentary on the political literature of Assam. Not only is it occasional, it is undervalued – that is, where it exists at all.

Consciously political writers – whether women or men – are a rarity not just among the Bodos, but also in Assam in general. Very few writers have dealt with contemporary political realities and even fewer have used literature for protest. Given the highly charged political atmosphere that has marked the state for so many years, it is surprising to note that just a few writers have used a potent tool like literature to get their political messages across. Political activist Anjali Daimary, for instance, has led hundreds of women in public protests, but as a translator who has also won the Sahitya Akademi award for translation in 2007, her literary pursuits have not been overtly political.

There are some exceptions, of course. Anju Daimary, a writer who lives in Kokrajhar, claimed that while she is not a consciously political writer, she does recall conceiving a satire in verse on the "corpse of democracy" after witnessing the many irregularities in the first democratic elections to the BTC. These elections were held in 2006, three years after the signing of the BTC accord, and they were characterised by a mad scramble for power, which led to immediate factionalism among the accord's signatories as well as the creation of various disempowered sections – including women – within the community who did not get any representation in the council.

Anju happens to be one of the very few Bodo writers who has focused on the human aspects of the protracted armed conflict in the region that has also led to the dehumanisation of some sections of the community. One of her short stories, *The Test*, deals indirectly with insurgent violence. Its protagonist, a trainee militant, debates questions of mindless killings. Ordered to assassinate an innocent old man, the trainee feels "sweat on my forehead. When I set my target on birds, cats or dogs, I didn't have to battle with my feelings. Now I felt my hands heavy, as if all the weight of my whole body had gathered in my right arm." In the end the task is

done. “Dumbly now, I followed the lieutenant across the river. I couldn’t turn my head back. The bright moon was shining as a witness over my head.” Anju’s words create a powerful image of the human response to the conflict and moral struggles that it entails.

In writers like Anju and Pramila lies the hope that there will be others like them who will – whether consciously or not – capture the impacts of conflict and violence on ordinary lives.