

THE MAHILA SHANTI SENA AND THEIR RESPONSE TO THE FLOOD IN ORISSA

After six days of incessant rains, the River Subernarekha flooded. With three breaches along her banks, the river brought with it floods to 5 blocks in the districts of Balasore and Mayurbhanj in Orissa. One of the panchayats that was flooded in the district of Mayurbhanj was Gadighati—the place where the Mahila Shanti Sena movement began in the state of Orissa. Unnayan and the members of the MSS residing in Gadighati were the first to respond to the flood. When the embankment along the river was damaged, a group of 100 men and women worked through the night of the 6th of July to repair the breach.

The women of Gadighati Panchayat were first trained in the values and the principles of the MSS in November 2005. At present, there are 30 SHGs in this Panchayat that have been formed and are being groomed by Unnayan. The Mahila Shanti Sainiks in the area have so far been actively involved in various social issues. The women have dealt with many cases of Domestic Violence, corruption; participation of women in the Panchayati Raj and have also addresses criminal cases in the past. Responding to a natural disaster was a new experience for all the women.

On the morning of the 7th of July, MSS volunteers immediately stepped into the distribution of relief material. A group of women set out along with a cycle trolley and bags of *chuda* and *gud* (pressed rice and jaggery). One of the villages, Tikayatpur, was completely cut off from all the other villages. The women, wading through waist deep water with sacks of dry food on their heads, ensured that the food reached to the families that were worst hit by the flood.



Shanti Sainiks wading through water on their way to flood-affected villages.

In the first 72 hours of the flood (7th – 9th of July), the entire area was inaccessible. The MSS, Unnayan and Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology, Bhubaneswar (KIIT University) were the three institutions working together in a tripartite partnership to ensure that the relief material reached to the affected families. On the first morning after the flood, the MSS set up community kitchens at 6 different villages.



A community kitchen



Total Relief Material Distributed in the First 72 hours in Gadighati Panchayat by the MSS, Unnayan and KIIT University, Bhubaneswar:

S.No	Particulars	Support Agencies	Total
1	Polythene	KIIT, University	184
2	Dry food (Chuda and Gur)	KIIT University	928
3	Community Kitchen	Collection from MSS members, SHG members and KIIT University	3200
4	Candles	KIIT	250
5	Health Camps	Antodya Chetna Manch	262

MSS members who reside in neighbouring villages that were not directly affected by the flood were also quick to respond to the situation and contribute their share to the relief operations. MSS members contributed rice, dal and potatoes that went to the community kitchens. The MSS contributed 200 kilos of rice to the kitchens that fed 1004 people for 3 days till larger agencies stepped in to assist in the flood relief operations in the area.

On the 9th of July, the programme officer from a large International Funding Agency, Oxfam, visited the area to assess the losses due to the flood and plan for the possible intervention. At present, Unnayan is working with 10, 000 families in 14 Gram Panchayats providing temporary shelter and providing families with safe drinking water to address any cases of diarrhea. Many MSS members are also working as volunteers in these panchayats as a part of the awareness campaign.



MSS members conducting a survey to assess the damage to people's homes. Shanti Sainik, Archana Behera in action as a volunteer



The MSS played a very crucial role in responding to the flood immediately, helping affected families and saving lives, truly living up to their roles as change makers in society. Once again, they put themselves at the service of the community when their help was needed.