

Women In Panchayats

by
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THE central government recently passed a Panchayat Raj Bill in the Lok Sabha. Although the government has begun talking a lot about *panchayats* of late, the Congress government in the last 40 years rather than expanding has mainly been further restricting the rights of *panchayats*. Gandhiji had always emphasised the importance of *panchayats*. When he saw no mention of *panchayats* in the draft Constitution of independent India, he was angry. To pacify him, *Gram Swarajya* was mentioned in Section 40 of the Constitution.

The recent Bill provides for a 30 percent reservation for women in *panchayats*. But will women be empowered through an institution which itself has no power?

Women of our country are not safe from violence in their own homes. Yet the atmosphere of fear and insecurity in villages often compels them to stay confined to their homes. Can women implement the 30 percent reservation in such an atmosphere?

Confronted by such questions, I decided to interview some women in

Man taluk, Maharashtra, who have been *panchayat* members.

Kondabai

Kondabai Ramchandra Kalel, aged 53, belongs to the Dhangar (shepherd) community of village Valai in Man taluk, district Satara. The family owns 10 acres of land, in her husband's name. She is illiterate.

How many times were you re-elected to the panchayat?

I contested three elections. I won the first time, lost the second time, and won again in 1989.

Is anyone from your family in politics or in the panchayat?

No. Nor is anyone from my pa-rental family. But the *gram sewak* used to visit my parents' house so politics used to be discussed in the house.

How did you happen to stand for election?

A woman from the Dhangar community had to stand for the women's seat because this is the majority community in the village. I was known to be a bold woman so I was put up.

Do your fields produce enough to run the house?

If they did, why would I send my small children to work in Bombay? We get just enough maize to eat. For four months in the year, I have to work at the sugar mill.

That involves living in the factory premises for three to four months. How could you do the panchayat work from there?

I was not the only one in the factory. The whole village, including the *sarpanch*, was working and living there.

Did anyone in your family or the village oppose your standing for election?

Yes, my husband gave me a lot of trouble. I had taken his permission to stand. He agreed because he thought it would bring us some benefits. But when I was elected, he could not tolerate my moving around freely. He is very obstinate.

He always takes a crooked way. I am his second wife. The first died. He is 20 years older than I. He always was of a suspicious nature, doubted

me, beat me. Even after I won, this continued. I resolved on two things - to do some thing worth while in the *panchayat*, and to establish my image as a tough woman.

In 1980, the Dalits in the village demanded land. With the help of Shetkari Sanghatana activists, I talked to the authorities and despite the *sarpanch's* opposition, got some land in the village redistributed. After this, people's view of me changed.

Did your husband stop beating you?

(laughing and pointing at him with one finger) Would he stop just like that? I was earning; I also began to be respected in the village. Gradually, he began to find fewer pretexts to beat me. Now he does not beat me. One has to be very clever to stop a husband's beatings.

Does he sit in panchayat meetings?

What will he do there? What does he know?

Did you ever raise women's issues in the panchayat?

What *panchayat*? All of them are drunkards; all beat their wives. This is the condition of the whole village. To escape this, women have to rely on their own wits. Crying will lead one nowhere.

Now that your sons are grown up, do you have to take their permission to be active?

I brought them up and made them fit to earn. Why should I take their permission?

Now there is a 30 percent reservation for women. If there are two of you in the panchayat, will it improve women's condition?

Has my presence made any difference? There is a severe water problem during summer in our village. Women, including myself, have to walk a long way to get water. I have raised the question many times, and approached the *taluk* office. No one bothered. After all, it is not the men

of the *panchayat* who have to go to fetch water.

Women will have to do something on their own about their sufferings. If they hope that their tears will breed pity for them, that will not work.

What should they do?

How can I say? Am I educated that I should know?

Has being in the panchayat made any difference to your life?

Yes it has. For instance, am I not saying all this in front of my husband?

Sajabai

Sajabai Katkar of village Varjal, Man *taluk*, has studied only up to class three.

How many years were you on the panchayat?

Ten years - from 1979 to 1989. This year, I did not contest the election. I was always elected to a general seat, not a women's seat.

How did you enter politics?

My father did not contest elections but he was active in politics. I followed his example.

Has your father any connection with politics here?

No, not at all.

You are from the Maratha community where women are kept confined to the home and the field. Did you face any opposition?

I first contested an election at the age of 35, but I had already started going out of the house on my own, alone. At the age of 20 I wore a garland*, I used to go to distant temples on my own to sing *bhajans*. I had my own identity in society.

Since you contested not a reserved but a general seat, you must have had to compete with men. How did you win?

I had already been working for the people. I am literate. When necessary, I would go to the *taluk* office. People knew that my going there would get results. Both panels knew I would win, so both wanted to coopt me.

Did you face any opposition at

home or in society?

It was hard for society to oppose me, because I was a garland wearer.* My husband did not oppose me. There was a lot of propaganda against me that I do not look after my house and how can one who does not look after her house look after the village? The same persons who said this had earlier tried to get me on their panel. Knowing this, why would anyone listen to them?

I have heard that both the political lobbies here want to have you with them.

Yes. But I neither join anyone nor do I fight with anyone. Politics has become debased so I have withdrawn from it. Better to sing *bhajans* than to get into their quarrels.

You work in the fields as well as at home. How do you get time for panchayat work?

How do we find time for festivals and pilgrimages? In the same way I find time for *panchayat* work.

Did you raise any women's questions?

Yes. A man of our village raped a girl. I caught him and made the community sit together and decide to turn him out of the community. *Will the 30 percent reservation for women make any difference?*

It will. It will be good to have two women instead of one. They will find it easier to raise questions together in the *panchayat*.

If 30 percent are women, it will also be easier to get a 51 percent majority vote on any issue in favour of women. To pass a vote of no confidence in the *sarpanch* or the head of the district board you need a 75 percent majority. So the men too will feel the need to carry women's opinion with them.

How can women's condition be changed?

*This phrase is used in this area to refer to one who is very involved with god and religion.

I believe that women must be able to move about in the society with dignity, only then will they have the self confidence to do any work. I wore the garland so I was given respect That is how I had the confidence to work; people listened to me. Only if we are respected will our views reach other women or society.

Hirabai

Hirabai Khasaba Katkar, aged 50, is a Maratha and belongs to village Varjal in Man taluk. She was a member of the *village panchayat* from 1968 to 1983. After that, she did not stand for election until 1989, when she won with a higher vote margin than all the other candidates.

Is anyone from your family in politics?

No.

Did your family play any role in your standing for elections?

What role would they play? My husband is very simple. I was married at the age of 12.1 grew up in poverty. In my in-laws' home, I worked for Rs 1.50 as a hired labourer in the fields. My husband also worked as a labourer. My father's sisters are married into this village. Their husbands are not in politics but people go to them for advice. They are well known in the village. When I was to stand for elections they encouraged me.

Did anyone in the family oppose the idea?

As I said, my husband is very simple, and my parents-in-law had died long ago.

Did your rivals slander you as a woman during the election campaign?

The first time I stood for election, I was 30 years old. As it is, people are always ready to attack a woman's character. A young woman standing for election gave them a pretext. When a king goes out on an elephant, dogs will bark. Those dogs are neither seen nor heard. Yet they cannot be

silenced. The earth and sky know the truth about me.

You first stood for election in 1968. You were only about 30 years old then. How was your name decided on?

Ours is a Maratha majority village. So, naturally, a Maratha woman would be decided on for the women's seat. That is how my name was decided on.



Hirabai

Were you active in any social work before your election?

No.

What work was done during your tenure?

We set up a school, a family planning clinic and godowns for storing grain. All these were built with the villagers' labour and cooperation. In those days, the *panchayat* had the people's support; now it does not. In those days, politics was not so petty. Now, what village and what *panchayat* - all that is left is the gutter and the liquor den. People have lost faith in politics because those who enter politics are there only for personal gain. To get the collective irrigation scheme sanctioned for our village, the *panchayat* had to pay a bribe of Rs 10,000.

Was any women's issue raised during your tenure?

No.

I heard that this time you did not want to contest the election?

I had participated in politics for so long. I said to my sons: "You are grown up now, the first right is yours." My sons refused.

Was your life changed in any way by your being in the panchayat for so long?

Changed! I used to work in the fields, and I still do. I have to wake up in the morning and work, only then do I get food to eat.

Has it made no difference at all?

It has made some difference. What do we women see apart from home and field? Do we know what a meeting is, what a *taluk* office is? When our village faced an acute water problem, it was I who went and talked to the authorities.

Janabai

Janabai Akaram Kolekar, aged 45, is a Dhangar. Her family owns six acres of land.

How did you come to be elected sarpanch?

After our panel was elected to the *panchayat* a man was *sarpanch*. It was only a year ago, after two and a half years of being on the *panchayat*, that I was made *sarpanch*.

Why were you not made sarpanch to begin with?

Do you think these men would make me *sarpanch*? They would not have made me *sarpanch* even now. It was only because of a quarrel between themselves that they decided on me. The man who was made *sarpanch* had agreed that after two and a half years he would resign and another would be chosen. But when the time came he was not willing to resign. So the rest forced him out and made me *sarpanch* in order to insult him even more, to make him feel that he had been de-feated by a woman.

Do you go to the meetings of the panchayat?

Earlier, I never used to go. Now, after becoming *sarpanch*, I have to go. But I do not go to the *taluk* office. My nephew, who is also a *panchayat* member, goes, or my husband goes.

Why don't you go?

Where do I get time? Is it easy for us women to go every week?

I have a lot of work. My husband just sits around smoking. I have to look after everything.

Then why did you become sarpanch?

I kept saying I did not want to. These men forced me, for their own benefit.

Has being sarpanch made any difference to your life?

What difference? The same fields, the same animals, the same kitchen.

Are you consulted when decisions are made in the family?

Who would consult me? It is I who have to ask my husband about the *panchayat* work.

Did you have to ask him for money for elections?

He looked after all of that.

Why didn't he stand himself?

My name was decided on for the seat reserved for women.

Will you stand again in the future?

No. My husband has decided against it, it is very expensive.

But you work with your hands, cannot you use your own earnings?

That may be so but can we women argue like that? We will be told: "Don't you eat? If you work, you also eat. Would you be fed without working in your father's house?"

Will the 30 percent reservation for women make any difference to women's position?

No difference at all. I am the *sarpanch*, has it made any difference to my position? We have sinned in our previous birth, that is why we are born as women. Toil and beatings are written on our brow. Only death can liberate us.

I interviewed these women by spending a day in each of their homes, but how much can one learn in one day? All one gets is a feel of the situation. Of these women, Sajabai alone was already active in social work and was elected to the *panchayat* in the general category, not the category reserved for women. Hirabai and Kondabai were elected to reserved seats but their election has affected their lives positively. Janabai is a *sarpanch* but says she was pushed to accept the position, and it has made no difference to her life.

All four women, when asked how women's situation can be changed, said that for women to get respect and be valued in society is most important. None of them felt that the police or the law courts could be of any help in bringing about change for women. They were convinced that the police and courts can be manipulated by means of money. Sajabai and Hirabai also said that problems in relationships cannot be resolved by the police or the court.

Has the 30 percent reservation helped women in any way? At best, it seems to have brought about some change in the lives of the individual women who have filled the seats. But it does not seem to have empowered women on a wider scale. One may hope that if a pro-women atmosphere is created in society at large, and a movement on women's issues gains momentum, then the 30 percent reservation may prove effective, and the women in the *panchayats* be able to play a useful role.

(translated from Hindi) □

We will soon be carrying a report of a study conducted by Manushi to evaluate the impact of the Shetkari Sangathana's campaign to secure property rights for women within the peasant families and to elect all women panels in gram panchayats. Our report will focus on Vitner village in Jalgaon district which became the first one to implement this programme.

Ed.