

The Warrior of Walunjwadi – Janabai Desai

She has been honoured with a presidential award in New Delhi, a special dinner in her honour at Agriculture Minister Shri Sharad Pawar's residence, felicitation at the hands of the Chief Minister and interview with the TV channels. People in all the surrounding villages come to her to sort out their troubles. And she also unhesitatingly comes forward at odd hours, day in and day out to mitigate their problems. This is the story of a woman who against all odds struggled to bring the people of the village together and carry out the development work. She is the indefatigable Sarpanch of Walunjwadi in Jawli taluka of Satara district – Smt. Janabai Aabaji Desai.



Walunjwadi is at the base of the hills of Mahabaleshwar having 67 families and population of 465 people. Farming is the only means of livelihood. And that too each family has only 5 to 7 goonthas of land. When villagers don't have drinking water, how can they provide water for agriculture? There is no regular source of income so young people from the families prefer to migrate to Mumbai. They seek out their living with meager income and send money to their families in the village. In such a village within 4-5 years the kind of unity brought about under the leadership of Sarpanch Janabai and the amount of progress brought about is just spectacular.

All 67 families in Walunjwadi village belong to the Maratha caste and have only two surnames viz. Padale and Desai. Janabai hails from Padale family and is married to Desai. From birth and childhood to marriage and subsequently she has spent all her life in one village only. For a class III illiterate woman who could barely put her signature Janabai lost her husband due to untimely death and shouldered the responsibility of supporting the family. When the children grew up, got married and settled down, Janabai had only one mission in her life and that was to bring about total transformation of the village.

During the 2003 gram panchayat elections, the post of Sarpanch of the village was reserved for woman. Before that there were no elections for Panch or Sarpanch for the last fifty years. There are two political groups but they fight for Parliament and assembly elections not for Grampanchayat. Panchayat is run with consensus and understanding. This time in the meeting it was unanimously decided that Janabai should be nominated as the Sarpanch. And she took over the charge as Sarpanch of Walunjwadi officially in May 2003. But nobody could have even imagined at that time that this simple girl from their village would achieve so much and make this small hamlet known even in the capital of the country New Delhi.

Unassuming and suave, Janabai would patiently listen to people, make her point and carry all people together in every issue. She decided in 2004 to make the village

participate in Nirmal Gram Abhiyan (Clean Village Movement). She chose one person from each household in the village and thus made a group of 60 persons. They decided to meet on every Sunday and ensure that the house and the surrounding area should be made neat and clean. The group firmly believed that they will do their best to win the award. And for that they made the village free from old unhygienic method of having community are for defecating and constructed separate toilets for each house. Today the entire community boasts of having separate toilets in every household. For the purpose of proper sanitation, drains were constructed to carry sewage water and four backyard plots were developed to plant fruit trees like chikoo and different varieties of flowers and that made the entire area green. Maximum efforts were made to provide each household with a gobar gas. Waste Material and gobar was used to produce gobar gas. Today out of 5446 families have gobar gas as the main fuel for cooking. In rest of the households, it is kerosene gas. But none of them are using wood or traditional chulhas for cooking. As a result, for the last three to four years there is no tree felling in the village. Janatai has formed a forest committee which has strictly prohibited tree felling. The village has also started a scheme called Akshay Prakash to have continuous light.

The women folk every day wake up at six before sunrise clean the surrounding area and swab it with gobar. Even a single leaf is also quickly picked up and put in the garbage. At national level, the village received first prize of Nirmal Gram Yojana (Clean Village Scheme) comprising cash award of Rs. 2 lakh. The Award Ceremony was scheduled at New Delhi. But Janatai had to make a very difficult choice. While she was overjoyed to see her efforts being acknowledged, her husband suffering from deadly disease like cancer and was at Tata Memorial Hospital counting his last breathes. She dropped her plans to go to Delhi for the Function. But her ailing husband called her and handed over Rs. 3000 and advised her to attend the function. He told her that she must not miss such an important event in her life; else she will never get a chance to even visit New Delhi. Janabai's voice chokes with emotions even today when she recalls the day.

Commenting on her experience in New Delhi while receiving the prestigious award Janatai says, just twenty years back, women could not go even to markets. And now I am an official invitee at the country's political power centre. It happened because there was a reservation for women and so I could contest the elections. Without reservation, I too would have been wasted in the trivial household work. She demands that the reservation should now be increased to 50% from 33 %.

Janatai later on became the Special Executive Officer. She is using her position to encourage the women in surrounding areas to avail the benefits of the government schemes. The young widows in the area have been given the subsidy under the Sanjay Gandhi Niradhar Yojana with her efforts. The aged women have been extended the benefit of Rs. 250 per month under the pension scheme while many families have been brought under the Antyodya scheme. Old people above 65 years have been provided with Concession for journey by ST Buses. Janabai has now acquired wide knowledge

about how to implement various government development schemes in the area or how the MP or MLA Funds can be brought to be used for the welfare of the people.

She utilized funds from the Grampanchayat to make proper sewage system. She also deposited Rs.3000 under Yeshwant Gram Samrudhi Yojana and obtained grants of Rs.27000 to construct water tank and toilets for the school. During rains children found it difficult to cross the river for going to school and many times they had to skip the school. With Rs.97000 from MLA's fund, a bridge across the river was constructed. An amount of Rs. 3 lakhs 20 thousand was utilized to build an auditorium for the village. She ensured that the price money received by the village was utilized diligently. In 2002, the village received a prize of Rs.25000 at the taluka level. She transferred the amount to Gram Samrudhi Yojana. Under the scheme, the village received Rs. 1.50 Lakhs for irrigation purposes. With this cash amount and the labor participation by the villagers themselves, Janabai got 9 bunds on the river and streamlet constructed. Under the Nirmal Gram Yojana, the village received Rs.2 Lakhs out of which again Rs. 1.50 lakh was deposited under the Yashwant Gram Samrudhi Yojana and enabled the village to receive Rs.15 lakh under the irrigation program. Janabai is optimistic that now they can arrest flight of the youngsters to Mumbai. The new plan envisages digging of a well near the river and lifting the water to the hill top so that the entire village receives irrigation facility for their agriculture.

The then District Collector at Satara Shri Pramod Nalawade had also heard about the dedication of Janabai and villagers' attitude to collectively do the development work. He visited the village one day and surveyed the Bunds built by them and was immensely happy to see the work. When he saw the unity and hard work of the village he gifted an ancient tank built during Shivaji's days to them. The village decided to up grade and renovate the old tank. The Irrigation Officers of the Zilla Parishad surveyed the spot. Studying the rocky surroundings they declared that the work can not be completed with such meager grants which was a challenge to the villagers. But the villagers proved them wrong and crushed the rocks.

Janatai showed exemplary zeal in getting the work done and at the same time ensured that there was equitable distribution of the resources created. Earlier, the drinking water was supplied to the village by tankers. The wrangling over the water distribution was a common sight once upon a time. But since she became the Sarpanch, a tank for drinking water was built from the panchayat funds. She ensures that there is equal distribution of water by being present at the time of water distribution and taking stock of the water supply. With her initiative, all the houses in the villager are registered in the joint names of the husband and wife. It is difficult to credit Janatai for all success she attained unless you mention the kind of support she received from her family members particularly from her late husband.

Just as she dedicated herself to the village activities, she also takes on the issues faced by her contemporary women representatives of other Panchayats. To encourage other women also for their participation in the villager politics and enable them to understand the intricacies of the local governance, Janabai never is seen going alone whether it is for all women gathering for haldi- kumkum or leading a demonstration. She would always have 4-5 women accompanying her.

Janabai's accomplishments received due recognition in New Delhi. Similarly Dy. Chief Minister R.R.Patil, Ajit Pawar, Srinivas Patil and many front line leaders paid glowing tributes to her good work by personally visiting the village.

Those who opposed before her election as Sarpanch now come to her seeking her favors. But Janabai never discriminates on who is the supporter or opponent. She is driven by only one thought that the village will prosper only when every single person prospers.