

Beyond the Caste Politics – Jyoti Meshram

The twelfth standard pass Jyoti got married. And from this point her life truly started taking a turn for good. On the insistence of her husband who was a Homeopathy doctor, she did her Post Graduation in social work. Jyoti Meshram was quite restless as she wanted to put to use her education and do something concrete for the society. It is interesting to know the story in her own words.



‘I belong to Potgal village in Gadchiroli. There was a reserved post of Sarpanch. One group of the village supported me for the post. I was elected in November 2002. A dalit woman (a downtrodden) reaching the top post of the Sarpanch of the village was a welcome sign indeed! But many members of the Grampanchayat were not all too happy about it.’

‘I belong to Pordiwari Group. There was another group Gadhewari of which nine members were elected on the Grampanchayat who had openly declared non cooperation with me. The bitter memories of the torture I have gone through are still fresh in my mind. I was not allowed to use government funds allotted for the development. Lot of work was held up because of this non cooperation.’

‘I was a woman and that too belonging to a low class, so it was very difficult for them to accept my supremacy. Sarpanch and the secretary are together supposed to jointly do the business. But these nine members refused to cooperate with us. This was a great insult for me. Then I along with my husband and the Ex- Sarpanch pursued the matter with the Panchayat samiti, Zilla Parishad, District Collector and the Commissioner. After about seven months the verdict was announced and that was in my favour. My right to conduct the business was upheld.’

Jyotitai won the battle but that was only short lived.

‘The other group immediately brought a No Confidence motion against me. But the case went up to the District Collector who struck off the decision. Many times I wanted to quite. But my husband Jayram stood behind me and I could fight the battle. Although I got all the business under my control, I wanted to hit back for the humiliation I had undergone for months together. And so I filed a court case against the nine opponents. They all were suspended. But later on, the Nagpur Court reversed the decision and gave relief to them. They started attending the Grampanchayat meetings again.’

‘It was not easy for me now. They had started harassing me. Initially, they started insisting that any new work has to be started as per their wishes. They would oppose me for the sake of opposition. Even the monthly meetings they would come for were not without event. A couple of times they were drunk. But the other villagers intervened and advised them to be careful. They had already been suspended once and this post is not an easy one to get. They became subdued but even some senior members had this highhanded attitude. They felt they

knew everything and that I was nobody to tell them what should be done. But I remained firm and unwavering. I started convincing them on my point of view. And it was then I realized that women folk from the village must organize.

‘Mostly women did not attend the Grampanchayat meetings. I noticed this in a couple of meetings. And then I made a self help group of my own and when other women saw us in a group, they all were willing to join us. Today there are 23 groups. They undertake lot of activities. There are mainly saving groups. Today women take decisions about utilization of Grampanchayat funds. Once men used to come drunk for the meetings even in programmes like gharkul and create nuisance. But today the presence of women is conspicuous. In the Gram Shiksha Samiti (Village Education Committee) more than three hundred women attend the meeting. Earlier only two women would attend the meeting. Today their participation is fifty percent.’

For the last two years, Jyotitai has been connected with Rajastta Andolan. She is the founder of Nagpur Division of Panchayat Mahila Aghadi and also the President. Jyotitai says, if there is any injustice against the women representatives, they follow it up.

She always quotes her own example to others. When they started the literacy movement in the village, she would encourage the women to come forward. She would tell them, ‘if I could ride bicycle for six km. for schooling everyday, they had all the luxury of teachers coming to their door step. So why couldn’t they do it?’

There is no fixed time for the job of the Sarpanch. Early morning while cleaning the utensils, suddenly there would be a call for her and she would be forced to leave everything and attend to it.

There would be a complaint that somebody’s husband has come home drunk and created a brawl. As the Sarpanch you have no choice; you have to go. Once a woman was thrown out of the house by her husband. But all the women folk gathered and made him to make amends. To solve the women related issues, they have formed a committee called Vishakha. Besides, she also encourages women to develop their latent talent. There are cultural programmes and competitions like kabbaddi etc. Jyotitai says, ‘Well, I don’t really mean to praise myself, but being a Sarpanch had indeed made a sea change in my life.’ Women have started openly discussing their problems. They have also started getting to know about various schemes. Now, there are schools in the village, even the classes are being augmented. Those who speak against Jyotitai are getting a fitting reply from other women in the village. Programmes on freedom from bad habits like drinking are conducted in the village. But Jyotitai still feels much is left to be desired because she could not strictly implement prohibition.

While there is great satisfaction of having done something good, Jyotitai has her own dreams. She has done work at the village level. Now she is planning to contest elections for the Panchayat Samiti of Zilla Parishad. Let us hope Jyotitai will get this opportunity even without any reserved seat.