

## The Bold and Brave – Meeratai Raulkar

Meeratai should solve the problem of water immediately or else people expected, she should quit the post of sarpanch. Besides, it was linked with the conflict having casteist and monetary overtones. Both Meeratai and her husband Subhashrao together took a decision. They went to the local goldsmith. To pay the long outstanding bills of water levy, meeratai pawned her Mangalsutra – the golden sacred thread in marriage besides other gold jewels and they returned to the village only after clearing the outstanding of the water levy. Over twelve years have passed since the active participation of the women in governance. But still each of these empowered women have fought each batter individually and chartered a different course for themselves. Each of them has a different story to tell. Meeratai's political struggle is a classic example of why we should look at the society from the women's point of view.



Yelga is a small village of Buldhana district in vidarbha, surrounded by the area of river Painganga's backwaters. But in this village, she has made a benchmark of an ideal sarpanch. Thirty five year old Meeratai Raulkar hails from a khatik (butcher) family and is a woman sarpanch. About four years back Meeratai's husband Subhashrao suggested that she should contest the elections of the grampanchayat. With frugal savings, tai had managed to contest elections. Earlier Gram Panchayat had groups and lobbies. Tai contested elections with the support of one small group. Suave and simple by nature, she approached everybody in the village for votes with confidence. The group had assured her that if elected she would be nominated as sarpanch. There was not much truth in it. Still Meeratai, despite of all odds, quietly continued her campaigning. The panel supported by the group stated high visibility campaign. But gradually she realized that the panel members were not actually canvassing for her. It was then that she took the election seriously and started door to door campaigns.

There was big voter's turn out. On the day of the election results Meeratai herself went to Buldhana to know the outcome of the elections and she romped home as winner. But the village had different plans as instead of Meeratai somebody else was appointed as sarpanch. The panel played the group politics and singled her out and convinced to elect a male members as sarpanch. When meeratai came back, she understood their plans and she became furious. She took on the people with direct question why women's participation in elections is a taboo? Of course but with no impact. Grampanchayat started functioning but Meeratai was not content with it.

And she also decided to play wise moves. Of course, she had the support of her husband. So they went and joined the other group in the panchayat. The established upper cast members made a hue and cry about it. Tension built up in the village. But after lot of

heated arguments, Meeratai succeeded. All the discussions with the opponents were fruitful and finally she occupied the seat of the sarpanch.

She had never behaved like a puppet doll and hence she seriously started gathering information on the duties and responsibilities of the sarpanch. She had her schooling only up to third standard. But she decided to study every aspect of the working of the grampanchayat. To have a dalit (untouchable) woman as a sarpanch and let her supervise the functioning of the panchayat is a tall order. And so the powerful group from the establishment started to act as bitter opponent.

But she had always been conscious of her responsibility to work only in the larger interest of the society. She started work on digging a well to overcome water shortage of the backward people. Hurt by her success the opponents chose to lodge a complaint but Meeratai met tehsildar and explained why it was essential to have the well dug and the work was started once again.

As a result of this and to counter her popularity her opponents played a new game and stopped paying levy for the water. They went to the extent of boycotting her family. Her husband Subhashrao and her children suffered miseries. Nobody would invite them for any wedding ceremony. Subhashrao was removed from the Dam Committee. The upper cast pro establishment felt threatened by a simple woman who herself was from the nomadic tribes and hence the communal hatred became all the more prominent.

In the mean while, the electricity bills remained unpaid for long and the water supply to the village was stopped. Now, this became a good pretext to challenge the sarpanch. Under section 35 of the act the case was initiated against her. People stopped coming to the meetings called by her. At one point, they even treated Subhashrao roughly. But he stood by her solidly. He started helping her for her households as well as outside work.

The villagers expected that Meeratai should solve the water problem once for all or else vacate the office of sarpanch. And it was obviously a conflict of interest due to castes and money. Both Meeratai and Subhashrao made a decision. They went to the local goldsmith and pawned the gold jewellery and her Mangalsutra to raise Rs.31000 and pay all outstanding water charges. They returned only when this problem was sorted out.

Her opponents lost face and credibility. By this single action Meeratai became a household name in all the surrounding villages and not just that even in the entire state. And now she started fixing responsibilities. She frantically pleaded with everybody to pay up the outstanding charges. People gave her lot of promises only to be broken. Then she started direct action. She hired two persons on daily wages, collected the instruments and went to people with clear instructions- either pay now or I will disconnect your water supply. This had an immediate effect as people came forward to pay for their dues. Meeratai got her jewellery released from the gold smith.

On 15th August flag hoisting ceremony, she was cautioned that due to code of conduct you can not hold the ceremony. But she ignored such warnings because she was well informed about the code of conduct. Meeratai's struggle does not end here. While she was busy collecting the water charges, there were complaints against her with the District Collector that she has not conducted regular meeting of the panchayat. In fact, the meetings had taken place but the proceedings recorded in the register had been torn off. But on the basis of records available with Meeratai, the District Collector rejected the appeal for action. The opponents did not beat a retreat. Instead, they approached the Commissioner. The commissioner also verified the facts and rejected their appeal. After that Meeratai established good relations with the government officials and became more active in governmental work. She was immensely benefited by getting elaborate information about the govt. sponsored programs at various levels.

Now opponents again drew their knives under the pretext of taking action against Meeratai's relative who had constructed house in the boundary of Panchayat. Meeratai was challenged to take action against him or else resign from the post. But the relatives also stood behind Meeratai and subhashrao unflinchingly. We will demolish the house and build it somewhere else but you should not lose your post of sarpanch, they told her. She could retain her post despite all odds because these people supported her. Tears well in her eyes as she narrates her struggles. Some times all this becomes unbearable for them also, but they are determined that the cause is more important.

Now Meeratai has organized Self Help Groups in the village. She is also attached to the movement of Mahila Rajsatta Andolan and has acquired detailed information on Panchayati Raj, working of the grampanchayat and is getting full cooperation from different agencies. Recently, the then Hon. Governor of Rajasthan (Now President of India) Pratibhatai Patil had also felicitated her. There are number of Savitris like Meeratai who are willing to struggle for changing the society, but what is really needed is more and more Jyotibas who will support their wives in their struggle to make them reclaim their legitimate place in the society.

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(Source: Towards Empowerment)