

## Lesson in Perseverance – Ratnamalatai Vaidya

It was the first term of the first lot of reserved constituencies for Ganeshpur in Bandara district. Ratnamalatai Vaidya was elected as member of the Gram Panchayat. With her SSC certificate it was Ratnamalatai's husband who encouraged her to opt for the new vocation. Ratnamalatai was also curiously interested in the politics. She learnt many things of gram Panchayat with the assistance of her husband. She brought the book on Gram Panchayat. And like a pupil before him, Suresh Vaidya conducted classes for her on the subject of Panchayat administration. At the end of the day he would make her revise what happened in the Panchayat meeting or in the office and would point out the flaws in her understanding. He would constantly remind her of her responsibilities and how if without understanding the issue she has discussed the matter in the meeting, what are its implications.



And one day Ratnamalatai's coaching was put on trial. In the 1994 floods the huts adjacent to the boundary of the village were swept away. Many houses in the village were inundated by flood waters as the floods came on continuously eight times. But nobody in the village came forward to something about it. Then Ratnamalatai gathered the women from the village and went up to the residence minister Shri. Harshawardhan Patil. The police force for the security was also surprised to see such odd hours in the night a group of women coming to visit. The minister called an emergency meeting of all concerned and called for a report on the situation in the village. There was a mention of only one time flood in the report given by the Patwari. But conceding before the angry women from the village the Minister agreed to have immediate survey of the situation on the next day. In the process the flood affected people immediately got the relief and they were also granted Rs. 500/- as immediate aid. The losses suffered by them in the floods were duly recorded in the government records. People spontaneously came forward to thank her and other women but the opponents could not digest the direct action by Ratnamalatai.

The first time elected Ratnamalatai created unprecedented energy with direct action and so next five years was a testing period for her. Again thereafter the elections were declared but even before that Ratnamalatai was pushing the literacy movement vigorously.

The seat in her ward was reserved not for a woman but for backward class member. There were also men backward candidates but Ratnamalatai had a popular backing and people gave her a resounding victory. She felt more encouraged by the faith shown in her work. By this time, she had also learnt how the posts of Vice Sarpanch and Sarpanch were adjusted. She discussed the elections with the opposition people and managed to get a support from them. She was chosen as vice Sarpanch.

Ratnamalatai was fighting on numerous fronts simultaneously. She started building the united force of the women for the development work in the village, making united efforts to solve their problems, following up the cases for injustice against women etc. While empowering herself in the functioning of the village Panchayat, she also roped in many women to create a force.

For the third term Ratnamalatai had decided to contest Zillah Parishad election. A woman representative constantly third time challenging the male bastion was something very difficult for the men to stomach. And they started a vilification campaign against women. Particularly against Ratnamalatai they started spreading rumors and tarnishing her character. Finally comments like she is seen outside at odd hours and she has illicit relations with men there put on pamphlets and distributed in the village. Obviously such a campaign was aimed at demoralizing her from any further work.

Ratnamalatai was deeply hurt by this humiliation. But the couple had decided not to be disheartened. Both of them went to the police station and lodged a criminal complaint. The police on the basis of the complaint started the investigation to find out where the letter had been typed. It became a serious matter. For Ratnamalatai this was indeed a trying period. She lost the elections. But she relentlessly pursued the matter with the police. Finally police could not trace the author of the letter or the source from where it was typed and so the case was officially closed.

But Ratnamalatai came out much stronger from this bitter episode. She tried to remain cool and never lose her newly earned confidence. It was also a testing period for the family members showing strain on their love and affection for tai.

With her dispassionate work she gave confidence to people that she was innocent and there was a deliberated attempt to tarnish her character. It was a well planned political strategy to desist her from going to Zillah Parishad. But even today she sticks to her firm resolve to contest Zilla Parishad elections.

Today she is only a Panchayat member. But shedding all negative thoughts, she continues to her work as usual. When she was introduced to Mahila Rajsatta Andolan, she became more vigilant about making the subject committees more active and providing them statutory powers. She is secretary of the water supply. She is also a vice chairman of the Education committee. She is making efforts to ensure that all children both boys and girls must get opportunity to pursue education.

With such a long experience of the Panchayati Raj administration she earnestly wants to push some agenda for the community welfare. First thing is when at the gram Panchayat level some construction work is approved and after processing when the final approved plan and the certificate issued by the engineer for Payment of the expenditure is sent to

the Panchayat, it is always in English. And it is very difficult for the Panchayat members to understand its details.

Therefore, there is always a scope for scam since quantity of material like how much iron or cement is to be used is not understood by the members. And even the work done is substandard. And therefore all these documents should always be in Marathi and not in English. She is trying to make this demand on the platform of Mahila Rajsatta Andolan.

The agenda and the minutes of the Panchayat meeting must be given to Panchayat members. There is no specific rule although it may be given if somebody insists upon. Many times the women members or the Sarpanch do not insist on the copies. In fact, they do not understand the significance or some times if they know it, they don't know whom to make the demand. In the circumstances if a member is not present for the previous meeting he or she should automatically get a copy of the proceedings of the meeting. Ratnamalatai is pursuing the matter.

Today she is called upon by Sarpanch and vice Sarpanch of many villages for guidance because of her long experience and the work she has done. Knowing her contribution to the Panchayat even the present Sarpanch or the members do not mind to adjust the date and time of the meeting to suit her convenience. Everybody acknowledges her presence in the Panchayat is of immense use for the community.

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(Source: Towards Empoerment)