

Lezhim Story of Shirgaon, Sangli - Maharashtra!

‘*Lezhim pathak*’ (a troupe playing the *lezhim*) of Women from Shirgaon in the Tasgoan taluka of the village of Sangli (age 20 to 45) won the first place at the district competition held by MAVIM. How did this happen? It is important to understand what followed from it and how this helped women ascend the seat of power.



The population of Shirgaon is 2500 with 150 of them being graduates. The village is eight kilometers from Tasgoan. The school in the village teaches up to standard X whereas the English medium school is up to standard V.

In 2005, the place of the **Sarpanch** was reserved for a woman candidate and **Anjanibai Amrutsagar** was victorious with a maximum number of votes.

Anjanibai’s journey from member of the *bachatgat* to a well-respected Sarpanch is very interesting and perspective developing. The village already had *bachatgats* due to the efforts taken by MAVIM – Mahila Arthik Vikas Maha-mandal. Anjanibai was a member of the *bachatgat* and had also participated in some training programmes. She knew about the Gram Sabha. Though the gram Sabha never took place, the peon came home to get her signature to mark her ‘present’ for the Sabha! She was well aware of why this was happening. The *bachatgat* persuaded her to fight the elections and with complete support from her husband, she won. Everyone expected her to be a Sarpanch only in name and at times to put her stamp and signature as and when directed.

On being appointed a Sarpanch, she immediately received a congratulatory letter from MRA and within two days of her winning the post she was on her way to attend a seminar of MRA at Solapur. There she met other women like her, participated in the training, got informative books and returned with greater confidence.

Before she won the elections, the village had the same Sarpanch for 40 years. A woman participating in politics was unacceptable. How does one go about? Anjanibai decided to go ahead with what emotionally appealed to the women. She organized the Mahila Gram Sabha in the school and also a *haldi-kumkum* function on the same day. She invited experts on the occasion and held discussions on issues bogging the village and measures that needed to be taken. This motivated women to participate in the gram Sabha.

The group of women led by Anjanibai had participated in the kho-kho competitions organized by MAVIM. At the Gargoti seminar however, they danced to their hearts content and shattered sanctions against women taking to dance.

After this spontaneous spirited performance by the women, Anjanitai put forth the idea of forming a *lejhim* troupe in the next *bachatgat* meeting. The women immediately agreed. Mr. Kumbhar from the village, was a willing 'coach' for the troupe. In the beginning, people were critical. They passed condescending remarks like 'let's invite them to dance at the weddings now!' However Anjanitai was so respected and trusted leader, that the displeasure melted away very soon. The women learnt the basics from Kumbhar sir. Slowly they learnt the intricacies too. They practiced quietly in the fields. And then winning at *taluka* and the district levels bagged the first prize in the competition organized by MAVIM.

They realized why a handkerchief is tied around the hand, why the need for a uniform (similar saris), importance of flexibility of the body and the need for team spirit! Now the women want to practice the *lejhim* everyday- it is also a good exercise they admit!

In 1969, the Shirgoan village had first bagged the award for cleanliness. In 1972, the village was the first to implement the tap scheme and the 1997, also the first to build toilets.

After Anjanitai became a **Sarpanch**, they did not insult her being a dalit. The flag was hoisted by her on Jan 26th. Dr Nana her opponent supported her in her work for the betterment of the village. One ZP member happily offered his tempo to help these women travel to Gargoti. The women contributed Rs 50/- each for diesel expenses. Anjanibai especially mentions the support extended by the honorable home Minister- Aba-R.R.Patil.

The village has 30 *bachatgats* with a turnover of about five lakhs. Under the Yashwant Gransamruddhi Yojana, she raised Rs. one lakh as people's contribution and undertook the work of concretization of the lanes in the village worth Rs 8 lakhs (of these Rs 2 lakhs went towards leveling the road). She received Rs 5 lakhs from the community welfare and worked for the Matang community with these funds. Also Rs 5 lakhs was received to build a community hall. She helped implement and sanction schemes like the Jawahar Yojana, Zilla Parishad School (Rs 4 lakhs), a water barrier (Rs 12 lakhs) and also got five and a half lakh worth water pipeline for the village.

From the money received through collections of the 12th Finance commission (vitta ayog vasuli)', she rebuilt the 'chawadi'-(platform), bought tables and chairs, built drainage system. Today the village has built about 75% of the toilets. Anjanibai, is today preparing the village for 'Nirmal Gram' competition.

After being elected, Anjanitai opposed verbal abuse in the Gram Panchayat which often turned in to duels and the panchayat became a fighting arena- Anjanitai put an end to this. She firmly opposed bogus voting during ZP elections and won praise from one and all.

Learning economics through the *bachatgat*, becoming a *Sarpanch*, implementing development plans, inviting training institutes, sports, relating health and sports, using traditional festivals for good purposes- what was achieved by all this? Who will contest the next elections? Every woman in the village raised her hand! Each one wanted to take the lead.

The *lejhim* troupe induced flexibility and importance of team spirit MRA imbibed the courage to fight.

Will each village in Maharashtra boast of such a *lejhim* troupe? Will this progressive state permit women to play? Anjanitai has played an instrumental role in enhancing women's confidence by breaking the taboos!!!

Take the first step.....-

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