

Ms. Archana Jatkar

Ms. Archana Jatkar was elected as the member of the Pokhari Grampanchayat in September 2006. Further, on account of the seat of the Sarpanch being reserved for a Women candidate, she was elected as the Sarpanch of the Pokhari Grampanchayat on the 9th of September, 2006.



This was not the first time that Ms. Jatkar had contested the Gram Panchayat elections. On the previous occasion, when she contested elections, she lost by mere 1 vote. However, realizing the mistake that they had committed, the villagers apologized to her and urged her to contest the elections in 2006. They vowed to support her. Thereafter, in September 2006, she was elected as a Sarpanch to the Gram Panchayat - unopposed!

Ms. Jatkar believes that her village is her family and therefore works for the development of her village, with dedication and conviction.

When she assumed office as the Sarpanch, the situation of the Pokhari Grampanchayat was very gloomy!! Gram Sabhas were never held in the village, traditional power holders and local leaders had an upper hand in the haphazard decision making of the village, women were apprehensive about participating in the public meetings. Given this reality, the first task at her hand was to activate the Gram Sabhas and elicit women's participation in the developmental work of the village.

She called for a women's meeting at her own house. However she received a very poor response for this attempt, with only 10 -12 women showing up. But Archana did not give up. She initiated a dialogue with the women, urged them to come forward and contribute for the development of their own village, ignited a sense of ownership in them. Her efforts were duly paid off when the number of women attending the next meeting surged to 70. It was at this meeting that Archana put forth the idea of forming women Self Help Groups (SHGs). The idea was so appealing and participation of women so active that within 3 days 8 women SHGs with a membership of 15 each were formed. These SHGs are now functioning effectively in the village.

As mentioned earlier, the Gram Sabha was defunct. No meetings were held and there was a lack of collective decision making. In order to activate the Gram Sabha, Archana summoned a women's meeting at her residence, once more, on the 25th of January and with their support the first Gram Sabha meeting was held on the 26th of January, in the presence of the entire village, including the women.

The village had a severe water crisis. But in spite of repeated requests, the men folk of the village turned a deaf ear. When she appealed to the people to help her implement the Water Supply Scheme in the village, some men opposed. As a result women continued to bear the brunt and walk upto 3 – 4 kms daily to fetch water. As a remedy to this, with the participation of the women, Archana made efforts to seek a permanent solution to the water crisis. She called a

meeting of the SHGs and suggested that they contribute for the building of a well in the village. Her suggestion was readily accepted and each SHG contributed Rs. 2000. Apart from this, Archanatai appealed for contributions from other people in the village. Even in this endeavor women were at the fore front. Women, working as daily laborers and earning a meager sum of Rs. 25 – 30 per day, came forward and contributed whatever amount they could afford. As result a good amount was collected to dig the well.

A place near the river was chosen to dig the well. The initial 1st installment under the Water Supply Scheme reached in time and with the help of the money collected by the villagers the first phase of digging the well went off smoothly. However the 2nd installment under the scheme was delayed and the work of the well was stalled. But the Village Cleanliness and Water Supply Committees came forward to support and assured that they will work day and night to see that the work of the well is not stalled. But money was a problem. Therefore Archanatai decided to shell out money from her own pocket! Within a month the well was ready and the village was relieved of the long drawn water crisis. The 2nd installment came only 2 months later!!!

This was the first time that the village had achieved success through collective participation. After this, there was no looking back! The water problem in the school was also solved by collective participation and public contributions. The actual amount required was only Rs. 5000, however Rs. 9891 were collected. Therefore the excess amount was utilized for purchasing utensils for the school.

Later, Archanatai also ensured that toilets were built and proper, nutritious food was given to the children. She mobilized money from the Zilla Parishad to build a compound wall for the school. Under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, an additional class room was also built for the school.

Apart from this, Archanatai also mobilized 2 lakh rupees to concretize the approach road to her village, which would be reduced to muck during the rains causing problems in transportation.

While ensuring the development of the entire village, Archanatai consciously worked for the deprived sections of the village. The Dalit settlement in the village often experienced water clogging. Therefore the work of widening the gutters was undertaken. But some opponents claimed that this work was leading to encroachment on their space. At this juncture Archanatai summoned a village meeting and urged people for their support. The villagers stood by her and work was completed.

Archanatai also discovered that the Panchayat body prior to her had encouraged corruption, taken Rs. 5000 from a widow and promised her a house under the Indira Awas Yojana. However, after they lost the elections, they backed out and she was duped off her money. This widow came to Archanatai for help. Archanatai took her to the Panchayat Samiti office. There the officer asked for her passbook. But the women claimed that she had given her passbook to the earlier Sarpanch and Gram Sevak, who had assured her that they will show her passbook in the Panchayat Samiti office and help her get a house under the scheme. But when Archanatai enquired with the ex Gram Sevak and Ex-Sarpanch, they kept passing the buck!! The Gram Sevak even had the guts to comment that, ***good women do not go to Panchayat Samiti office!!*** But Archanatai did not relent; she made a new pass book for the widow and went back to the Panchayat Samiti office. But now it was the officials at the

Panchayat Samiti office who took on the role to harass her. They delayed the issuing of cheque a number of times. After repeated requests fell on deaf ears, Archanatai fought with the officials there. She reminded them that she is not jobless and cannot come to their office everyday. They should give her one fixed date and time on which they will definitely give the widow her cheque. The officer gave her a date. She warned him of dire consequences if the widow's work was stalled any longer.

On the assigned date, Archanatai asked the widow to go alone into the office and she waited outside. Finally, after a long struggle the widow received her due!!

Another achievement in her work has been that crop loans have been made available for farmers at a low interest of 1%. Their district being a part of the Vidarbha region, witnessing the highest number of farmer suicides, these loans have proven to be of real help to the burdened farmers.

For Archanatai, her strongest support system is her family. Without their encouragement, she would not have been able to balance private and public fronts so well. Her family owns a pharmacy shop in the village and it is their source of livelihood. Therefore looking after household, shop and village becomes very difficult at times. But with her husband's support she has been able to traverse so far. Inspired by her, Archanatai's daughter wants to become a Sarpanch when she grows up!

Secondly, the villagers – especially women have been a great support. They have come forward with a helping hand on almost all occasions. Without their participation none of the Archanatai's work would have been possible.

Archanatai marks that MRA has been a great pillar of strength for her. It has trained her, guided her and supported her in all her work. More than anything else, it is the moral support that is the most valuable contribution of the MRA. Archanatai assures that given this support she will take her village onto new paths of development.