

Find a challenge and you will find Belebai!

The village of Devani is big, in name and in political fame too! The population is about 25,000 and since last many years only one political party is in power. Even today Women, backward castes and tribes enjoy no status in the running of the village. Kushavartatai Bele had begun working among women through the rural Mahila Vikas Sanstha. Today there are approximately 24 Self Help Groups (SHGs) in Devani village itself and about 400 women and their families have been closely knit. Also, 42 nearby villages have come together with 164 SHGs and founded the Savitribai Phule non-agriculture women's cooperative credit society. The Taluka office of this credit society is at Devani. On the basis of her large networking with all these people and her determination to contribute to the development of her village, Belebai was ready for elections. She wanted to establish her independent women's panel. As she learnt her ABCs in politics in the election arena she realized that if she had to win, she will have to align with some panels. Firm that she will not join a religiously fundamental and caste-ridden party, and that her women should win in all the posts reserved for women, she had talks with the Congress party. Later this panel overthrew the party reigning for years and emerged victorious. Belebai and four other women became members of the Gram Panchayat. This story after the Saigata began doing the rounds in every village.



“What after Saigata”?

Take Mahila Rajasatta Andolan afar! This was the reflection of the thoughts of many women present at the Sangamner seminar but voiced by the dynamic Belebai of Latur district. With the ‘Dharti Bachao’ movement close to her heart and bringing women together under the auspices of SHGs Belebai was inspired by the Saigata seminar. Understanding that if one had to work for the social upliftment in the village, it was not enough to just organize women but it was also necessary to play a role in the functioning of the village and hence in June 2000 she jumped in to the Gram Panchayat ring.

Believing politics to be a medium of social work, Belebai got her first lesson about power equations during election campaigning itself. About 100 women from the village came together and began house to house campaigning in the small groups. The opponent camp could not digest this. They started using tactics of breaking the unity among the women and dangling carrots. As this procured no results they went a step further. They went to the extent of beating her husband right in the middle of the village. Belebai immediately rushed to stop this and got the involved persons arrested. Not just that, in presence of the villagers, she also exposed who was the real mastermind behind the attack. Being a social worker at heart, she had learnt right at the beginning not to take injustice lying down. Hence she emerged unscathed through the various skirmishes of the election.

Today it is two years since she has come into politics and enjoys the seat of power. **She is constantly thinking about how much of what she had set out to achieve was actually happening**, about experiences she gathers as a representative of the people and about solutions to problems faced by her. She slowly changed the Gram Panchayat. ‘Today even when some women go to the Gram Panchayat without me, they are **treated respectfully**. Previously they would be kept waiting at the door for hours together. Today, the Sarpanch and the Gram Sevak immediately help in the concerned matter. She is also a member of the Bhoomihin Samiti (organization for the landless), Shikshan Samiti (education board), and the Police Mahila Dakshata Samiti. Meetings of these Samiti’s are conducted regularly every month. Belebai feels that these also facilitate taking the work for the welfare of the people a step further. The Tehsil office had delegated the work of making a list of the landless persons in the village. The Samiti did so excellently. The list comprised 364 persons without leaving out any truly needy person.

‘Village politics and village matters have 60% truth and 40% dishonesty in them. I am upset by this. Dishonesty is not justified. But one cannot force honesty all the time. But I have very strongly demanded that when poor, landless and the needy come for help, they must not be troubled for money. No money should change hands for certifications. I don’t tolerate this at all.’ She feels that the work of the Samiti enables one to scrutinize these things and have a hold over matters. Belebai and her women members heartily talk about one more thing. ‘Being a big village, problems are ever-present. And the Gram Panchayat does not have enough funds. The funds that are there are used up for this and that. Repairs and maintenance always suffer. I clearly told the Sarpanch that water, village hygiene and electricity problems have to be addressed immediately. If these three things are under control, the villagers and mainly the women will be happy.’

Belebai has also made efforts to put more life in the Gram Sabha of the village. Today the number of women attending the Gram Sabha has increased. She narrated a recent Gram Sabha incident. ‘The issue was regarding distribution of land for housing purpose. Women were also present at this Gram Sabha. Just as the sabha was to begin, it started pouring. The crowd began dispersing. It looked like there would be no Gram Sabha. The register was kept at one end and people were asked to sign it. As it was an important issue I expressed that the sabha must be held. People waited and a list of 45 people was approved in the Sabha. We saw to it that the real needy were included in the list. We worked honestly. I then proposed that the plots distributed should be in the name of the woman. With discussion, it was agreed that the plot should be in the name of both – the husband and the wife. But how would all agree to this? Some tongues wagged – you say that put your wife’s name too and what if she ran away tomorrow? Many nodded their approval. Then we had to raise the question as what would a wife do if her husband ran away? After that, our proposal was accepted.’

‘From social perspective one can clearly state opinion but it is not the same when you are a representative of the people. One has to take everyone under consideration.’ Belebai talks about problems faced by her very earnestly. For the last many years the Sarpanch of the village belonged to the other backward class. A no-confidence motion was tried to oust her once. That failed. Just like till today, women have been denied the right to power, the backward castes and tribes have also been kept away. Hence even today, the people who are elected from a reserved seat, they are not easily accepted as the representative of the people or a Sarpanch. Efforts are made to bring them down from the seat of power. To foil such efforts the differences among our own people have to be set aside. To be both a social worker and a representative of the people is walking a tightrope.’

‘Also being active in social work I can keep all political parties at bay. One can talk to all the women in the village about any question. Today everything gains political hues, aims are questioned. We would take out ‘Morchas’ (protest march) on issues related to people previously and we still do it. Today our every work is looked upon with the politics in the background. Women are constantly fed with lines like - she leads the Morchas, she must be gaining money, she is making it big at your cost...’ Belebai however sees this as a part of political training of women. If one has to be in the political field, in power, one has to face all this but see to it that one does not become a part of the same.

After seven years of political experience, Belebai stood for the Zilla Parishad elections. She faced all problems sensibly. She accepted the bitter-sweet experiences of election. Fighting a close battle, she won the Zilla Parishad election. Not just that today she is the chairperson of the Mahila Bal Vikas - Women and Child Welfare Department. In the very first meeting she raised a simple question as to why were men served chilled water in bottles whereas women served normal water in glasses. This was just an example as to how deep-rooted were the simple discriminating norms in the society. All women, with the support of a few men, stopped this practice. She politely challenged the clause stating that said that budget allocations for women should be a minimum of 10%. She raised the point that minimum 10 did not mean only 10. Speaking for the women she got a raise of Rs 5 lakh in the budget. This is just the beginning. Belebai does not fight for herself. She, who would walk for miles from one village to another, has been given an ambassador car. It is filled with activists and women. She feels that a jeep would have accommodated more activists.

Addressing the Chief Minister as being “Son of Latur” and asking him to issue an order within a week to enable women Sarpanch to hoist the flag, Belebai today faces the mammoth task of crumbling the men-dominated political conclusions. She will definitely accept the challenge. Find a challenge and you will find Belebai already there- The movement is now used to this.

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