

## The story of the fearless Latifabhabi

The Gram Panchayat of the village of Raimoh in the Shirur Taluka of the Beed district is an **example of National Integration**. The village has an equal number of Hindu-Muslim populations residing peacefully with one another. There have never been communal riots or tensions between Hindu and Muslim communities and the near by villages admire this unity among the people of Raimoh. This village with an approximate population of 5000 has a Gram Panchayat comprising 11 people of which six are women, with the Sarpanch also being a woman. Among these the name of Latifa Azan Shaikh is respected. The 37- year-old Latifabhabi is an active member of the Gram Sabha and a very dynamic worker of Mahila Rajsatta Andolan (MRA). Under the guidance of Lalji Jadhav and Kusumtai Salve, Latifabhabi who is also the president of the Chandbibi SHG has participated in many movements with great zeal & vigor and solved cases concerning atrocities against women. Whether, the work involved atrocities committed on women or the female child, or a strike to resolve developmental issues of the village, a struggle, a Morcha or a hunger strike, Latifabhabi is always on the forefront.



She enjoys the complete support of her husband, who has strongly stood behind her every time. He is himself a trustee of the Mahatma Phule Social Research Institute and an old party worker of the Communist Party of India (CPI). Be it a fight for the sugarcane workers, a struggle to get a hostel for their children, to get work in the village under the Rojgar Hami Yojana or a question of picketing at the Tehshildar office, this husband – wife team have devoted all their efforts for the cause of development. It was Latifabhabi who built the SHGs in the village. Then, the people laughed at her and passed derogatory remarks and questioned her intelligence. However she paid no heed to them, and continued her work to organize women. Her experiences taught her that through the medium of SHGs, the issues related to women can be raised, their needs understood, their questions heeded and their participation encouraged in the development of the village.

Even before being elected as a member of the Gram Panchayat, while doing the work of MRA under the guidance of Kusumtai Salve, Latifabhabi raised her voice against injustice meted out to women. When the husband of Pushpa Narode, a 25-year-old girl, deserted her, women of the SHGs from Ruppur, Gopalwadi, Khalapur and nearby villages filled into two tempos and took out a Morcha to the Panchayat Samiti. They presented a petition to the Tehshildar and then proceeded to the police station in Beed. They narrated the entire situation to the police. The police summoned the husband to the station where he promised to take her back but in reality did not do so. The very next day all the women met the collector. The collector then summoned the husband. He agreed to return the one lakh rupees spent on the wedding. On the third day they sat on strike outside, the husband's house, collected the one lakh rupees and succeeded in getting justice for Pushpa. The important aspect is that within three days, spending from their

own pockets, these women were able to obtain justice in the case. Through this case Latifabhabi showed how the united strength of the women of SHGs can do wonders.

After the Pushpa Narode case, an unknown gang committed atrocities on two girls and a woman belonging to the OBC category living in Kothegoan, of the Pathardi Taluka. To get justice in the matter and see to it that the criminals are punished, under the guidance of Lalji Jadhav and Kusumtai Salve, 250-300 women of the SHGs marched to the police station and submitted a petition demanding quick action and strong punishment for the offenders. This impact of the march set the wheels of the police system rolling and all the accused were caught.

Last February year (2006), a 14-year-old girl was raped by a relative aged as much as her father in the Bhankawadi village. The SHG women not only taught a lesson to the fiend but also got the girl rehabilitated. It so happened that the 14-year-old girl was left with the accused by her parents when they traveled away as sugarcane workers. Taking advantage of the fact that she was at his mercy, he repeatedly raped her. She got pregnant. As her parents were uneducated they did not know how to resolve the matter and leaving her in the same situation they went back to work at Belapur and the girl delivered a baby in the barn. As there was no one to look after her, the women of the SHGs came forward with Latifabhabi in the lead. The village of Bhankawadi is five kilometers away from where Latifabhabi stays. Even so, accompanied by Kusumtai, she rushed to help the girl. She also got hold & help of the Police Patil. She got the girl admitted in the government hospital. The girl was kept there for 8-10 days. Kusumtai talked to the girl and then the true picture emerged. After getting all the information meetings of the women of all SHGs and MRA were held. Women got united to get justice for the girl and teach a lesson to the culprit and marched to the Beed police station. They met the concerned police officer and also submitted a petition. They also warned that they wanted results in two days. The culprit was caught in two days and charge-sheet filed. Latifabhabi and Kusumtai summoned the girl's parents. This unwed mother would not have been accepted by the society. It would have made her life miserable. All women got together to find a solution. Lalaji supported everyone and with the permission of her parents, she was sent to a Christian missionary rehabilitation center. In this manner, the activists of MRA, determinedly found a way out and got justice for the girl from Bhankawadi. Handling such challenging situations, Latifabhabi is carrying on her social and political work with aplomb.

Trained under Kusumtai, it was no wonder that a dynamic worker of the MRA Latifabhabi filled in her nomination in the March 2006 elections. Her husband also completely extended his support to her. Looking at her zeal in social work and her eagerness to participate in a social activity, her husband wanted her to enter the Gram Panchayat and make her mark in the development issues of the village as well. He was also confident about her victory. And she won with a good amount of votes polled for her. Even after she was elected Latifabhabi worked dedicatedly for the development of

the village. She is not afraid to question the Sarpanch and the Gram Sevak about pending matters that have been sanctioned in the Gram Sabha nor does she falter from going on a hunger strike along with other women members of SHGs and MRA to protest against the delay of work regarding building toilets and roads. Being fearless, knowing and using her right as a Gram Panchayat member and getting the developmental work done- these are the special qualities of her personality. However whatever is done is done publicly and by taking the people along. This very quality of Latifabhabi has enabled a lot of progress in the development work of the village. Previously, women had to travel outside the village for water in the summer. All water sources in the village would run dry. Bringing this issue forward in the Gram Sabha, she got three new water tanks built. The village had no drainage system. Thus new 'Nallas' and gutters were built. Not stopping there, along with other women members she sees to it that they are cleaned along with garbage bins from time to time. Cement roads were built in the village. An overhead water tank was brought for the village. Thus the water problem issue was resolved. Raimoha has a weekly bazaar. In the public places, stalls have built and given on lease. The rent is however not received on time. She with the help of other women members put pressure on the Panch and the Sarpanch to see that the rent is received on time. The women selling their wares at the market as well as women coming to buy things are greatly inconvenienced due lack of toilet facilities. Understanding this Latifabhabi and Parvati Jagtap did upheld, the demand for the need of a public toilet.

Having learnt at MRA to not let husbands interfere in the work, and do work themselves as a member of the Gram Panchayat or as a Sarpanch, Latifabhabi discourages husbands of all members of the Gram Panchayat from meddling in Gram Panchayat affairs. Once the husband of Godavari Sanap came for a Gram Panchayat meeting but he was asked to leave. She did the same when her husband came for the meeting as well. Previously, the husbands of women members looked in to Gram Panchayat affairs. Trained by the MRA, Latifabhabi and other women members broke away from the tradition and today run all affairs by themselves. The honest and clear way of handling matters and her fearless nature contribute to this change in the women is admitted by all. And this is the achievement of MRA.

Exposing housing fraud:

Of the many things done by her, the housing fraud exposed by her is very well known. A very recent event of 2007 everyone recollects it vividly. In the March meeting, the Gram Sevak and the deputy Sarpanch kept information regarding Rajeev Gandhi Niwas Yojana and another housing scheme for BPL in the dark. Without taking anybody in to consideration, they quietly passed a resolution and forwarded the proposal to the Panchayat Samiti. After 8-10 days, the Sarpanch and the deputy informed Latifabhabi about the forwarded proposal. When asked why it wasn't told in the Gram Panchayat meeting, they had no answer. Latifabhabi smelled a rat in the whole thing. She immediately called the Panchayat Samiti Extension officer. It was then that she was informed that the housing schemes had been forwarded long ago. Wrong dates of Gram

Sabha and Gram Panchayat meeting had been put in. On knowing this, Latifabhabi immediately met all Gram Panchayat members and informed them about the incident. No one was aware of any such proposal. A meeting of the Gram Panchayat was immediately summoned and the Gram Sevak, Sarpanch, and the deputy Sarpanch were questioned. They were cornered. When Latifabhabi asked them to recall papers sent forward, they told her that she did not know anything about the official proceedings. It was only when Latifabhabi threatened them with filing a written complaint with the BDO that they relented. Fearing that he would lose his job, the Gram Sevak got back all the papers that had been submitted. A formal Gram Sabha was held. Latifabhabi was successful in getting proposals sanctioned only for the poor and the needy. Thus her name became synonymous with a person fighting for the rights of the people and she became someone to reckon with in the Panchayat. Not only did the corrupt Gram Sevak and officials learnt lesson, it also stopped wrong practices in the Panchayat.

Latifabhabi pays great attention to see that women are organized under the MRA and empowered. Admiring her experience, women MRA activists from nearby village seek her advice. Not only does she guides them but at times accompanies them to the Panchayat Samiti office or the Tehshildar office to hasten the process. In this manner, she works continuously to bring together women in the MRA movement and enhance their communication with each other. Her husband helps her in any which way. He is proud of his wife and wants her to represent the people in the same manner in the Panchayat Samiti and the Zilla Parishad as well. Though an illiterate, attending various seminars and frequenting the village branch of MRA, she is gaining political know-how and confidence. This has given an impetus to her progress in politics. It goes without saying that she will prove to be a path-finder for the women stepping in to politics.