

'The Success Story of Mayatai Sorte'

Mayatai Sorte was born in the small village of Kharola, Taluka Renapur. She was born in a Dalit family, where both her parents were landless agricultural labourers. Her family was surrounded by poverty. To top it, her father had married for a second time. Therefore, since childhood, Mayatai and her mother were left without any support.



The evils of poverty and untouchability have been a part and parcel of her life since childhood. While studying in the 6th standard, Mayatai had a very bad experience because of the caste-based discrimination in school. A good friend of hers belonged to an upper caste (Vani Caste). Mayatai used to often visit her house and even eat with her. Her friend's grandfather loved Mayatai as he loved his own grand daughter. Therefore his death left Mayatai in great grief. She cried a lot and went to attend his funeral. As she moved ahead to pay her last tributes to the old man, people present for the funeral objected her presence. "How dare you, a dalit girl, come for the funeral of an upper caste? " Mayatai cried and requested them to allow her pay last tribute to the dead. But the people opposing her did not allow her to go near the body of the dead man! She returned home without paying tribute to her beloved grandfather.

Mayatai says, "Since childhood I am courageous. I was fond of horse riding & playing with boys. On seeing my extrovert nature and straightforward language, my relatives often told me that my behavior does not suit a 'girl' and therefore suggested that I should be married off at an early age. They thought that marriage would restrict and correct my behavior and I will start behaving like a 'typical' girl."

Mayatai was married off when she was studying in the 7th standard. Her in-laws encouraged her to pursue her studies further. However she entered motherhood at a very early age. But she did lose courage! She took care of her young son and simultaneously completed her education till the 12th standard. Until 8 years after marriage she continued as a housewife. The financial situation of her household after marriage was not too good. Immediately after marriage, she had to join the family for agricultural work. Her in-laws village was a very famous place of religious worship. But in terms of developmental work, the village lagged behind miserably.

Mayatai gradually started working on formation of SHG groups and women's organization. This process was a tedious one and she had to face caste-based discrimination. When she and her colleague (who belonged to an upper caste) went to the different houses around the village to meet women, they both were given tea and snacks, but Mayatai's cup was always kept separately! She used to feel very bad about but preferred to keep quiet, so that the process of building women's groups and SHGs does not get stalled.

Once, Mayatai along with her had gone to Latur to attend a programme of women's organization. The programme was to be held in the hall of a hotel that had lodging – boarding facilities. The schoolteacher saw the women entering this lodge and that was it! He spread around vulgar rumors about the two women. "These women go to hotel rooms!" he publicized. All men of the village looked at the two with doubting and accusing eyes, the other women stopped talking to them. Organization's work came to a stand still.

Mayatai and her colleague, however, could not understand why people's behavior towards them had undergone this drastic change! After a month or so, a woman from the village finally said, 'You two had gone in the hotel at Latur. The schoolteacher had seen you going there himself. He was the one to tell the entire village about it! That is why no one is talking to you.' The two women were shattered on hearing this. They were feeling ashamed and had no clue where to hide their faces!

But they decided that they would bring out the truth! They decided that the teacher (who had spread the news) should be felicitated on his achievement of being awarded as the "Ideal Teacher". From their own money they brought a shawl, coconut, garland for him and felicitated in front of the entire village. After all the respected villagers had given their speeches, Mayatai got up to give her speech. She asked that teacher, 'With whom did you see us going inside the lodge? What were we doing there?' The teacher retaliated, 'I haven't spoken about you to anyone!'

At this instance, the villagers, who had kept quite till now got angry and said, 'You were the one who told us that these two women go to hotel rooms!' When the teacher saw the entire village rise against him, he apologized to Mayatai and her colleague in front of the entire village. Other women present there repented that they had accused and doubted the two women.

In Mayatai's village, there was a stark difference between the Dalit and Patil (upper caste) households. All essential resources like bore well, roads, electric supply were concentrated in the area resided by the upper castes. But in the dalit households, even the day brought nothing but darkness with it.

Near the Dalit households, there was no source or facility for water. Women had to move from one well to the other, walk over 3-4 kms to fetch one pot of water. Roads and electricity were untraceable in the areas where the dalit families resided. The only occupation in the village was agricultural labour work. Therefore, the Village Patil was the sole employer in the village. By virtue of being the sole employer, he ruled the village! He was the ultimate source of power. Therefore no one in the village had the courage to speak a word against him.

Majority of the Dalit households were dependent on the ration shop for food on account of the low wages paid to them and seasonal unemployment. But the ration shop dealer was involved in corrupt practices and was supported by the Village Patil. The dealer would not supply food grains on time. When he gave ration, it

would be less than the actual amount allotted on the card. All of a sudden he would stop the supply and announce that the stock of food grains was over. Women had to face a lot of troubles because of this. They had realized that that shopkeeper is perpetuating injustice on us. They were angry about it, but were clueless about what to do. In the mean time, the women read in the newspaper of a program being organized in Latur on the rationing issue. They started collecting money and were successful in sending one woman for the program. Later a discussion was held in the women's group about the information and written material that was given in the program.

Soon after that the women went in a large group and confronted the ration dealer. They asked him to produce the documents such as his registration papers, register of accounts, the etc. When he was unable to produce genuine documents, the women gave written complaints against him and demanded that ration should be distributed fairly. Later the women also went to the Rationing Officer at the Taluka level and launched a complaint against the ration dealer of their village. But it was of no help, as the local ration dealer and the Taluka Rationing Officer were working hand in gloves with each other!

The women, however, did not give up and went to the District officer. The officer at the district level was a woman. She assured of rightful action against those guilty. The officer herself came to the village, raided the ration shop in the village, carried out investigation and later sealed the shop!

But then the village politics came alive and the Village Patil started pressurizing the women to take back their complaint. 2 women who were leading agitation were called by the Village Patil on his bungalow and held back for one full day and night. Mayatai was one of them. The villagers were so terrorized by the Village Patil, that even the women's husbands made no efforts to set them free!

However the next day, all the women of the village came together outside the Patil's house and demanded, 'Either the 2 women be set free or all of us be captured! We all had launched the complaint.' Over time, the ration dealer was penalized. The villagers started receiving their proper share of ration.

In the village, every year a religious ceremony is performed in the temple of god Nagnath and the people are given food as 'Prasad' (god's blessings). On this occasion a common dinner would be organized for all the villagers. A family from the Dalit community has donated utensils to the temple for cooking purposes. A fund for this purpose is collected from the entire village. However when it comes to eating food, the Dalit families are served food at the end, after everybody else finish. They are to be served by a "Touchable" i.e. an upper caste person! They were required to bring their own plates and glasses to eat and drink from. By the time it was their turn to eat food, it would almost be mid night and most of the children gone fast asleep. Mayatai had great hatred against such discrimination. Once, she took the lead and advised the Dalit communities to boycott the Prasad (dinner) as a symbol of protest against the discrimination perpetuated on them for years. The Dalits boycotted the Prasad and no one from the community went to the temple for dinner. In this way they were able to

put an end to this discriminatory practice. Today the entire village participates together in all the festivals and rituals and untouchability is a thing of the past!

After the 73rd Amendment, women got 33% reservation in the Panchayat Raj Institutions. Implementation of this amendment led to a rise in women's participation in elections. However after being elected, the real power was enjoyed by the male members of their family. Some elected women representatives of the 1st generation refuse to contest elections for the second time and some of them are facing opposition from specially the male members of their families. But Mayadevi Sorate from Vadval (Dist. Latur) not only contested elections for the second time but she won them, unopposed. This election took place in last week of August 2005. She has slowly but steadily strengthened her power. She has undertaken several small, but important work in the village. Therefore she is strongly supported by the people. Through her good work she has also been able to win the confidence of the pressure groups of the village and encourage them to join hands in the developmental activities for the village. Because of the immense faith that people place in her, Mayatai has remained a non-controversial and successful figure in the village.

Member of Vadval Gram Panchayat, Mayatai Sorte expresses her views about power, "Without power in our hand we cant do anything! I can say this from my experience of the last 5 years." For her, the word 'Power' does not denote only political power. Her active participation in SHGs, Rationing Committee, Save Land Campaign & work at village level shows her inclination towards social power & organizational strength.

In July 2000, Mayatai was elected the as the member of Gram Panchayat without any opposition. She had thought that now she had the power and would use it to bring about constructive changes in the Gram Panchayat.

After being elected, she went for the first monthly meeting of the Gram Panchayat. She was very excited. In all 10 men and 5 women had been elected as the Gram Panchayat members.

But when she went for the meeting she saw that she was the only woman present among all the men. Mayatai asked them, 'Why are the other elected women representatives not present for the meeting?' On hearing this, one of them bluntly replied, 'Our women will not come. Henceforth we will be attending the Panchayat meetings!' She felt her anger rise against the Gram Panchayat officials, who had the authority to stop these men from attending the meeting, but they preferred to keep quite.

Mayatai's imagination of a Gram Panchayat was contradictory to what she was witnessing. she used to feel that the elected representatives should work wholeheartedly for welfare of the people and pay attention to the various problems they faced. Being a woman herself, she was aware that water scarcity was the basic problem women had to encounter in their daily life. She was concerned of how clean water could be equally distributed among all the villagers. Though there was a

common water tap meant for all the villagers, the rich and powerful population would divert the water from this tap with the help of electric water motors to their houses and the poor would be left behind without a drop of water. Therefore in the monthly Gram Panchayat meeting she suggested that, at the time when water supply resumes to the common tap, the electricity supply to the village be stopped. This would leave the rich unable to divert the water through electric motors and everyone will get equal opportunity to access water.

Everybody agreed with this idea and a resolution to that effect was passed by the panchayat. Gradually everybody started getting their share of water.

Mayatai made efforts to improve the educational standard of the village. A meeting was organized with the parents – to encourage them to send their children to school and help reduce the drop out rate. Though boys came to school, the girls were kept away from school. Their names were registered and daily attendance was being marked, but only a handful of children actually attended school. No one had ever paid attention to this problem. The education committee of the village was unaware of the rights and duties that were entrusted with it. They used to come for meetings, discuss, pass the budget and leave. In order to make these committees active, Mayatai and her group started conducting monthly meetings of the committee.

Showing a keen interest in the issue, the women's SHGs of the village adopted a few girls and supplemented the cost of their education – so that the girls would start going to school. They saw to it that the girls attend school regularly and tried to change the mindset of the parents. Gradually the girl child school drop out rate decreased and finally stopped.

Mayatai feels that the other committees in the village should also work independently. This is possible only if enough financial autonomy is given to them and a proper budget is made for each. But the fact remains that even if the committee plans for activities and programmes...finally it is the Sarpanch and the Gram Sevak who are in control of all the financial resources.

Mayatai's experience says that women participate well if special attention is paid to mahila sabha and gram sabha. MRA proves to be a strength and support behind the women. Now women have begun to realize, where the centre of power lies!

During her tenure as the member of Gram Panchayat, the Panchayat body passed a budget of Rs.67 lakhs. Money was used from various funds. But the main problems of the village remain unresolved. In the Vidhan Sabha elections she tried to assess the utilization of MLA funds. It was shocking to know that approximately in 290 villages this fund was utilized to build walls around the cremation grounds and build temples. There is dire need to allocate funds towards developmental work.

The total population of Mayatai's village is 10,000. Due to lack of proper sanitation facilities, women are forced to defecate along the road sides. Though there is

continuous vehicular traffic on the road, men are walking – women continue sitting, with their heads bowed down. But the villagers cannot see this!!! For them, building places of religious worship is a priority. Her village had received Rs.10 lakh from the MLA fund to construct a temple in the village. None of the men ever argued that construction of toilets and not temples is the need of the hour.

Mayatai does not oppose the construction of temples. But she feels it is important to assess the actual needs of the village. Needs should be prioritized according to their importance. The State's responsibility does not end by giving funds; it is also responsible to see that those funds are utilized for the development of the villages.