

Unleashing Political Renaissance By Rejecting Patriarchy

Boregaon is a small village in Solapur district of Maharashtra where men have shunned the patriarchal mindset to support women's political empowerment and gender equality, writes Suchismita Pai.

10 June 2015 -

Injustice is something that Ambika Umakant Gadve, 25, simply can't tolerate. As she looks at the water pumps piled up in one corner of the panchayat office in Boregaon she says, "My colleague and I have confiscated these. Water is for everyone and in this village each family gets equitable access to it. Installing a jet pump to steal more than one's share is wrong and we will not allow it." Gadve, a mother of two daughters, was voted to power as Sarpanch of Boregaon in Maharashtra's Solapur district in 2012 and ever since then she has turned her once backward hamlet into a model village where everyone has equal rights and a stake in the progress.



Ambika Umakant Gadve (centre), 25, voted to power as Sarpanch of Boregaon in 2012. Pic: WFS

Till five years back, Boregaon had been under the complete control of an influential local family, which had used coercion to “rule” the panchayat for nearly 40 years. During their uninterrupted tenure, from 1970 to 2012, there had been no joint decision-making and no meetings were held to map out a development agenda. And yet, every few weeks, someone would show up at the door of the panches to get their signatures for the record books. It was as if democracy had been barred from Boregaon.

So then what was it that brought about the remarkable transformation? How did Gadve decide to fight elections, defying years of status quo? What made the locals repose their trust in a female leader?

How did the change start?

It all began in 2010 when the Centre for Health and Social Justice (CHSJ) and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) initiated the Samajhdar Jodidar (Responsible Partner) intervention in this village. Implemented through five non-government organisations across 100 villages in Maharashtra, this specially-designed programme engages with married men and unmarried youth to fight patriarchal mindsets and change the inequitable gender construct.

“Patriarchy perpetuates prejudice, inequality and violence and we cannot do away with it without involving men. Therefore, we decided to enlist a few men from within the project villages as animators who could lead by example. However, initially our approach was met with scepticism not just from the menfolk but from women, too,” reveals Shakti Jamdade of CHSJ.

As a Facilitator with Halo Medical Foundation, the non-government organisation implementing Samajhdar Jodidar in Akkalkot block of Solapur, Basavraj Nare had his work cut out. He was on the lookout for conscientious animators who were not just open to overhauling their own belief system but could stand up to the negative backlash of the villagers. “I chose men who were not perceived as leaders, as they thrive on upholding traditional images of masculinity. I selected men who were unaware of their sensitivity but felt trapped in the morass of patriarchy and yearned to do something for their community,” he shares.

Nare’s search for the ideal change-maker for Boregaon ended when he met Manikchand Dhanashetty. Soft spoken and unassuming, Dhanashetty is not your average crusader and yet in his own quiet way he has been able to lead the charge of a change so significant that it has altered the way families bring up their children, how women are treated by the community at large and even the manner in which people participate in local governance.



Manikchand Dhanashetty led the change that altered men's treatment towards women of the community at large. Pic: WFS

Having been to cities where his older brothers were working Dhanashetty knew his people were being deprived of their basic rights and entitlements, especially access to clean drinking water, affordable health care and education. He also realised that the funds the panchayat was receiving for development activity were being grossly misused by a few powerful individuals. Keen to make a difference he was searching for like-minded partners but that was not possible in a community totally fractured by caste, wealth and power politics.

His meeting with Nare, however, paved the way for him to become the catalyst of change he always wanted to be. The sensitisation training he received under the Samajhdar Jodidar programme not only enabled him to evaluate his own actions as a husband, father and citizen but also empowered him to talk to other men and women about the simple ways in which they could improve their own lives and their collective destiny. A victim of patriarchal conditioning himself, it had never occurred to him till then that the injustices being committed in his village on a daily basis were, in fact, only a scaled up version of his own indifferent attitude towards his daughter. “Men are in power at every level and they use it to subjugate others – be it women at home or someone weaker in stature in the outside world,” he points out.

Needless to say, people in Boregaon were not ready to accept Dhanashetty’s ideas of gender equality and put up a fierce resistance. No one understood the logic behind men helping out their mothers and wives in household chores or taking care of children or reprimanding someone for domestic violence, all of which were vociferously advocated by Dhanashetty.

Moreover, when he started broaching the subjects like ensuring institutional deliveries, monitoring mid day meals and allowing girls to complete their schooling, this father of two had to constantly defend his motives – even to his wife and mother. He vividly remembers how his mother went on an eight day fast when he tried to expose the misdeeds of the local quack and push for availability of essential health services in the village. Then when the trusted ‘medicine man’ fled Boregaon, people started sending their ailing relatives to his home asking him to take them to the health centre.

Beginning of the success

“Nonetheless, Dhanashetty staunchly stood his ground. While Halo Medical Foundation stood by him, he was the man on the ground facing a new threat each day,” says Nare. Dhanashetty’s patience did pay off and gradually, things started to take a turn for the better. First in his own home – “whereas my brothers persuaded my mother that I was doing the right thing my wife relented as she saw how happy our children were when I helped them with their homework or took them out” – and later in the village, too.

Once Dhanashetty realised that the apathy in the system had finally broken down, he suggested the idea of putting up a candidate of their own during the Sarpanch election. “Although we had no money or experience the opposition had done nothing for years and everyone was beginning to see that things could change,” he

says. Their search for a suitable candidate ended when Ambika Gavde came forward, ably supported by her husband Umakant, and ended up with a landslide victory. “Both Umakant and I feel Dhanashetty’s approach is right. If everyone in the village has the freedom to express themselves, women included, and we work together as equals we can achieve anything,” she says.

Boregaon is a very different place today. Unlike the previous panchayat, the present group believes in action. One of its first initiatives was to institute a monthly Mahila Gram Sabha where women can raise issues close to their heart. Water shortage, a perennial problem, has been solved after a new four kilometre pipeline was laid and linked to a 40,000 litre tank. “Our work is not just about providing facilities but ensuring an equitable distribution of the benefits,” says Gadve. Additionally, the panchayat has set its sights on becoming a ‘Nirmal Gram’ and already begun constructing toilets, which they know is “necessary for the health and safety of girls and women”.

In its four-year-long attempt to inculcate gender equity and loosen the stranglehold of patriarchy the Samajhdar Jodidar programme has managed to broaden mindsets in a manner wherein they can never go back. And though change was slow in coming to Boregaon it certainly seems like the power of democracy and equality are here to stay. (© Women's Feature Service)

Suchismita Pai
10 June 2015