

# ग्राम पंचायत पळशी ता माण निवडणूक सन 1986 लेडीज पॅनेल

## The Ladies' Panel

Chetna reports how women of Palshi Village, Maharashtra, contested a panchayat election.




ELECTIONS to *zila parishads* or district boards in Maharashtra are scheduled for the beginning of February, 1988. Shared Joshi, the leader of the nonparty peasant organisation, Shetkari Sangathana, its women's wing, Shetkari Mahila Aghadi, have decided to put up a women's panel for the election. This is an innovation in Maharashtra politics. In the meeting called by Shetkari Mahila Aghadi in June, it was decided that women would contest the election under the independent banner of Sumagra Mahila Aghadi.

An all party meeting was organised by the Mahila Aghadi in village Maheswad, Satara district, to explain the issues. Shetkari Sanghatana is working amongst the peasants engaged in the government's employment guarantee scheme in this area. At the meeting, a man stood up and said: "LAST year, women independently contested *panchayat* elections in my village." The name of his village is Palshi in Man *taluk*, Satara district. It is a relatively big village with 10,000 voters.

लक्ष्मी वार्ड क्र. १

प्रिय मतदार बंधू-भगिणींनो-

ग्रामपंचायत पळशी व पळशी गांवाच्या सर्वांगण विकासासाठी व गोखरीबांची दुःखे निवारणेसाठी आणि आतापर्यंत रेंगाळत पडलेली कामे, पाणीपुरवठा, आरोग्यसेवा, शैक्षणिक विकास आणि स्वच्छ प्रशासन इ. जनतेच्या सुविधा उपलब्ध करून देण्यासाठी आमचे लेडीज पॅनेलला प्रचंड बहुमताने विजयी करा, ही विनंती.

अ. नं.	उमेदवाराचे नांव	चिन्ह
१)	चव्हाण सहबाई सदाशिव	
२)	केंगार सोनाबाई एकनाथ	
३)	सावंत मिराबाई दादा	

The population is composed of 40 percent gypsies (Banjaras), 40 percent Matangs (Dalits) and 20 percent so called upper castes. We were surprised to hear that women of this village had contested the election, since there are no outside activists or women's organisations in the village. I visited the village to investigate.

The village has been a stronghold of the Congress (I). The local Congress (I) leader, Sadashiv RAO Pale, hails from this

village. So far, two parties, the Congress (I) and Congress (S) have been active in the village. The Shetkari Sanghatana activist in the village is not active in politics.

Since Man *taluk* is a drought prone area, large numbers of people from Palshi work in the employment guarantee scheme. People from Palshi had joined the rasta roko agitation to demand employment guarantee schemes, organised by Shetkari

Sanghatan and Sangharsh Vahini. Most of the agitators from Palshi were women. Women usually predominate at employment guarantee sites since men tend to migrate from drought prone areas.

The Shetkari Sanghatana had not played any role in the Palshi women's contesting *panchayat* elections. The Palshi women had contested in September 1986.

In June 1986 the whole of Man *taluk* suffered severe water shortage. Drinking water was provided to the village by tanker. The Congress (I) leader used to get the tanker to supply water first to his house and the houses of his relatives, with the result that many of the villagers had to go without water.

A third configuration, apart from the Congress (I) and Congress (S) appeared in the village. This grouping was not attached to any political party. The wives of the men of this group were also activists. The group decided that women would *gherao* the *tehsildar's* office to demand water. This was the first time women of the village had been organised on a common problem although the villagers had often taken part in political demonstrations because the village is one of the political



centres in this area.

When the *gherao* was planned some people made fun of it, saying; "Now women will give water to the village." When the women narrated this to me, they said: "We ignored such taunts. Society always tries to keep women chained to the cooking stove."

On June 25, 1986, about 50 women

worked outside the village. These three women had studied up to class five. Their husbands' support was important in enabling them to fight the elections.

As soon as the ladies' panel was announced, the whole village mocked the idea, saying: "Women don't know how to look after the kitchen and children properly and now they want to run politics".

Sumantai said: "This made us all the more resolved to show that we could contest the election. We felt that if men helped us in the work, people would say that proved this was not women's work so we decided to do all the work ourselves." Also, the men of the group stopped taking as much interest in the panel when it became the butt of ridicule.

The candidates had to go to Dahiwadi to register themselves. Normally, villagers make this trip in a hired jeep but the owner of the jeep refused to take the women. The women think no one wanted to help them, for fear of also being laughed at along with them. They got a jeep with difficulty from the neighbouring village. A total of 13 women were to go, but at the last moment two women backed out because in-laws of their daughters had threatened to throw them out of their marital homes if their mothers stood for election.

---

### **The women had proved a point by contesting in such a hostile atmosphere**

---

*gheraoed* the *taluk* headquarters at Dahiwarda with the result that arrangements were made to provide water in adequate measure to all the villagers. In September 1986, the village *panchayat* elections were announced.

The Congress (I) and Congress (S) were busy preparing. They had a strong network which the independent grouping did not have. The group decided to put up a ladies' panel for the election. Three women were particularly active on this front—Lakshmitai Khare, Sumantai Khare and Rukmanitai Kore. They belong to middle peasant families.

Lakshmitai's husband was a member of the group and Sumantai's husband



**Savitri Bai**

---

Very few women in the village supported the panel. Those who did were afraid to express support openly. The symbols allotted to the ladies' panel were a sword, a taxi and a mango. These were mocked at: "Women will do politics, what will they? They will cut a mango with a sword and ride about in taxis."

One seat was being contested by a husband and wife, standing against each other. The woman was Gangutai Gangre. She had left her husband 15 years ago. Her husband had supported the Congress(I) leader on the water issue. Picking up this issue of a husband and wife clash, the opponents of the panel tried to slander the women candidates, but the women replied to such charges with dignity.

At one public meeting, a woman doctor from the next village was invited to speak.

A taperecorder could not be procured on hire for the meeting. The women candidates issued an open challenge to the slanderers to come up and make their charges publicly. No one dared do so. The ladies' panel also printed handbills, did house to house campaigning and wrote slogans on the walls.

The main issues taken up by the ladies' panel in their campaign, were drinking water supply in villages, toilets for women, and health centres. Interestingly, these are among the main issues taken up by the Samagra Mahila Aghadi for the forthcoming elections, too.

The ladies' panel secured 25 percent of votes polled and lost one seat by about five votes. They felt this was because, despite the mockery, many women quietly voted for them. Sumantai says they did feel disappointed at not having won a seat,

but they also felt they had proved a point by contesting in such a hostile atmosphere.

Both peasant women and women who work on the employment guarantee scheme works participated in the election. In this area, labouring women generally own a little land and peasant women too work for wages at times. Banjara and Dalit women had stood for election with Banjara women in the lead.

Rukmanitai said: "We proved that those who said women could not do political work were wrong. Also, we had new experiences during the election work. I had been married 20 years but had never seen the whole village. Only while working for the election did I go through the whole village, propagandising".

*(translated from Hindi)*